

ARES  
by  
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Part I  
Grass Prairie

The summer Roy Grover turned eighteen he was eager to hurry up and out-grow his birth place, Oklahoma. For several months his subconscious had been hinting a background from the Sooner state was slightly embarrassing. During the summer of 1942 he consciously concluded that "slightly" was too mild. Big changes were in the air, and, for him, Oklahoma became the most colorless place in the world. To put it bluntly he had been born in a hick state. How much easier it would be to face his new life with a prestigious background, for example, as a native of New York, London, or even California.

Was it because he felt put-out about being born an Okie that he tried to remember as much as possible of his early childhood? No, more likely it was because he had qualms about facing his new life. Reflection might bring him courage. It might also help him avoid some of the gaping pitfalls life held for those venturing away from home for the first time. So he began to think about little old Oklahoma.

Could he remember anything, the faintest glimmer, of something that happened when he was one year old? Roy thought he could. However, blurry flashes of memory are always unreliable about dates. A scene that he thought was his earliest recollection might really have taken place when he was two, three or even four years old. Scenes that he thought occurred when he was three or four might have happened earlier.

The memory, a mere flicker, that he reasoned must have been his earliest occurred in some yard, probably at the farm where the

Grovers lived. Someone was carrying him. Was it his mother? No, that didn't seem quite right. More likely his bearer was an older sister. He was wrapped in a blanket. Wait a moment. He couldn't be sure about the blanket. Logically, it should have been a homemade quilt. The Grovers were too poor to afford blankets.

Nothing took place in this mere flicker. Yet it stuck in his mind. Trees. Short, yet dark and brooding. Why dark, and why brooding? He didn't know why. They just were. Strange, because most of his childhood memories were a-dazzle with sunlight.

Dense foliage, none of which moved. A dead calm, which was another illogicality. Oklahoma, of course, is noted for wind.

In his reverie Roy knew the names of the trees, although at the age of one he couldn't have. They were locusts. Their trunks had once been white-washed, but most of the lime had worn off. Something was hanging from a horizontal limb, something tied with a rope. A barrel hoop. It must have served as a make-shift swing. No, his sister didn't swing him in it. This plotless flicker advanced no further than the fact that it was there. Did they ever swing in it?

Junky pieces of machinery were lying disreputably under the drought stricken trees as though an amateur mechanic had been cannibalizing old automobile motors and had left the discards wherever they may. Something odd about them. These loose cogs, crank-cases and fly-wheels were unrusted, but rusted or not, why were they in their yard? Roy knew his mother was exceedingly clean. And what fastidious woman would let fly-wheels mar her only grove? Besides unsightly cogs the ground was cut with deep, unsightly ruts, caked hunks of earth which resisted leveling. A mechanic must have gotten stuck there in a long wet spell. Or maybe his mother in early years



was not as tidy as she became later on.

He could also remember their car--the one that ran. At least he thought it belonged to this same scene. It had a high body and almost square corners at the top. The color was some sort of two-tone arrangement of gray and black. The windows were long, thin things fitting hautily in small doors. Getting in the car must have been like mounting steps to a hearse.

It was a nineteen-twenty-six Chevrolet. How did he know its make and model? Roy couldn't explain it. Somehow the date and brand stuck in his mind. Possibly his mother had told him about it later. Maybe when he was eight or ten years old she had dropped something about the family getting a new Chevrolet when Roy was an infant. The whole scene might be a fitting together of reasoned information rather than actual memory pictures. Reason. Was it more reliable than memory? An untidy yard strewn with automobile parts. Nineteen twenty-six. Automobiles were rarer then than in the early nineteen forties. Did he actually remember a time when his mother tolerated junk, or did he only reason that crank-cases were then too valuable to sweep out of sight?

He thought he could remember--or perhaps reason--the odor connected with the scene. Pungent grease. Thick heavy axle grease as well as its variant, lube oil. A mucky sort of odor suggesting futility, as though by applying loads of grease his father hoped to get machinery to work although it had never been designed to run smoothly. Or perhaps Roy had picked up unpleasant associations with the smell of grease later on. Roy hated tinkering with machinery.

Another unpleasant odor from early childhood also stuck

in his mind. Accurately dating the time it appeared in his life was, of course, uncertain. The smell of jute. He couldn't stand it when he was a kid. He remembered its odor was so over-powering it felt like particles of pure smell were pelting his nostrils. Funny, the stuff didn't bother him now. But in nineteen-twenty-six, twenty-seven and twenty-eight it was harder to escape. If you rode in a car you had to smell it. Layers of it were right below the pretentiously soft velvet upholstery. The cars had no heaters. Passengers had to wrap up in blankets, or quilts, or old overcoats. Babies were covered up with something and placed cheek down on the back seat. Only a thin layer of upholstery was between them and the jute. How old was he before he outgrew the hatred of back seats?

Cold winters. Which reminded Roy of another vivid scene. In this one he was old enough to walk, or at least sit, by himself. A cold day. If not winter, at least late autumn. Enough wind to leave a brownish haze of suspended dust in the air. Roy remembered he was dressed, not in baby clothes, but in some sort of little brown overcoat. On this cold, windy day he was forced to sit in a place uncomfortably, even terrifyingly, high up. Head wrapped in something--a shawl? The wind blew about another unpleasant odor. This one was the smell of dried corn shucks. Irritating. Was it odor or was it chaff that got in his nose, mouth and eyes? Why were odors of the farm so unpleasant? To anyone else the memory of an autumn ride a-top a wagon load of corn might be the sweetest of recollections. But not to Roy. He seemed born hating a farm.

A-top a horse-drawn wagon. No, motors definitely had not replaced horses. His father used animals to get his corn crop to



market. But why did his father have to perch his youngest kid a way up on top of his year's supply of corn and fool with him all the way to town, all during the bargaining with the skin-flint produce man, all during the day's selling, buying, loading, unloading, and then all the the bumpy way back home lucky to make it in before the wind froze them or night-fall got them lost? Well, it was because his mother spent days teaching school (and making more money than corn crops could), and Mr. Grover had to baby sit.

More scraps of memory--all mixed together with hear-say and must-have-beens. He was back in the family automobile, not the horse drawn wagon. This one might have been a Ford instead of a Chevy. His mother was doing the driving. She had a woman passenger. Mr. Grover wasn't in the car. He seldom was. It must have been a week-end instead of a school day because Mrs. Grover had charge of the youngest kid and had placed him on the back seat. By now Roy must, certainly, have been passed baby-hood because there seemed to be no danger that he would roll off or get himself fouled up.

Again he was surrounded by a brown overcoat, not his own, but a big one his mother had worn completely out. Both sleeves split under the arms made finding the true edge of this makeshift blanket rather difficult. It smelled of tweed and perspiration.

When he rode with his mother he was not supposed to kick off his cover, whatever it was, and he was not supposed to cry. He had to behave. By peeking through a button hole he could see the spot in the back of the front seat where some sort of metallic fixture had once been. The fixture had anchored the end of a fancy cord that back seat passengers could hang on to. Cord and fixtures were all gone.



Above the back seat, a way on up, he could see his mother's broad shoulders. His mother used to be fat. She was always solid-seeming. Her shoulders hardly moved as she piloted the car over the treacherous country roads. Talk. Talk, talk talk with the woman passenger. Hattie Grover, was, is, and always would be a compulsive talker. Odors. Besides the tweed and the dried perspiration an off-beat odor--imitation fox fur, and naphtha which had been used to clean the coat when it was wearable. And jute, and axle grease, and country road dust. Cold. The car's differential wasn't too good, and in addition to bad odors he heard its threatening whine. Also he heard the women talk. He was cold.

Roy could remember many scenes like the next one. He was throwing a temper tantrum. Some kind of Saturday afternoon work-fest. The room full of people, his mother, his sisters and a female neighbor or two. Wall paper on the walls, not the pasted-on kind, but the coarser stuff put on with big headed tacks and round metal tack protectors. Sunny weather. The door open. A lot of activity. Everyone too busy to fool with pampering kids. All the people but his mother came through as mere vague blurs. Hattie, however, persisted in his memory as clearly as though she were right in front of him. Her hair was then a bright red unstreaked with gray. she was still heavy-set, and she wore a white voile spring dress. Impatiently, she stopped doing something and walked over to her sewing machine and started peddling it. "He's having another tantrum," she said. "Pay no attention to him."

Roy kept kicking and screaming.

He could remember the whole room from the viewpoint of the floor. The sewing machine treadle was enormous. It was some sort of iron grill work painted black with decorations of

gold enamel. A greasy rod was attached to one corner and ran upwards through a slot in the curved, veneer bottom which housed the machine's guts. The veneer was peeling.

He remembered he eventually missed screaming for a breath or two and even considered going to sleep. Immediately, his mother said triumphantly, "See there. He's already cried himself asleep. Pay no attention to him."

Whereupon he renewed his kicking and screaming with increased vehemence. But the movements of the treadle became fascinating. Did he dare kick around in a circle and get his hand caught in it? He couldn't remember if he circled right or left, but he did get his finger caught in it. This time his blood-curdling yell could not be ignored. His mother shot up from her chair making the ship-lap floor-boarding creak. With one hand she grabbed him off the floor. With the other she spanked him. His throat became hoarse from shrieking. When she dropped him back on the floor he noticed he had a black blood-blister on his thumb. Later he drifted off to sleep.

In another scene he was older. They must have moved, must have been living on another farm. When he was a child they were always moving, not to some far off place, but only to a new start a mile or two away, to to a different house, a different pasture. On this farm two rows of mulberry trees stretched from the front of the house out to a dirt road. Like the very first trees he could remember these tree trunks had also been whitewashed probably by some passed tenant. Here the lime was sticking better. The trunks were still white. Again it was warm weather, and the two rows of white trunks and green leaves made the place seem neat, even grand.

The best he could remember it was a Sunday afternoon. It seemed like company had been there earlier in the day but had left by mid-afternoon. For vague reasons the three children must stay out of the house, something about their mother being sick. So Blanche, Rena and Roy were out playing under those fascinating and grand mulberry trees that they had been so fortunate to move in on.

Probably it was the summer he was four years old because he was big enough to walk quite well, but not developed enough to keep up with Blanche, six years his elder, and Rena, five years older than he. The two sisters kept pulling him along between them, one ahold of each arm. Excitedly they dashed from tree to tree.

They were told to stay out of the house, but that did not mean the whole Oklahoma outdoors was at their disposal. They must also stay out of those mulberry trees. Some vague prohibition. They saw a bird's nest. It wasn't far out on a top limb but was nestled in the lowest crotch just a foot or two over their heads. A silky spider web glistened in the late afternoon sun a few inches above the intricately woven brown grass the bird had made into a pocket sized home. Roy could remember Blanche saying, "We'd better not." Then Rena said, "We could say Roy did it."

The next thing he remembered Blanche had hoisted Rena up on her shoulders. Something about slicky with ripe mulberries. Something else about don't eat any. Then a lot of trashy dried leaves with worms on them fell down. Goody! Worms. Roy dashed about picking them up, watching them wiggle in his fingers,



squeezing. Then Rena was saying, "It's empty." Blanche said, "Get it anyway."

When he glanced up to see what was going on he saw Rena's white muslin bloomers. Exciting? Not at all. The best Roy could remember he had always seen his sisters' white muslin bloomers. Their mother was always making some, or washing them, or hanging them on the line. The girls were always wearing the bloomers. Sometimes on the hottest summer days they wore nothing else.

The nest dropped right at Roy's feet. Even more exotic than the worms. Horse hair, brown like the tail of old Sweetheart. Grass, springy brown grass, and a few yellow wheat straws. A few twigs, all fitted together as tightly as a basket. And a new smell, bird's-nest smell right after the fledglings had flown. It made him choke. So the girls took it away from him because Mama would get mad if he had a choking fit.

Then the girls were scrambling up in the limbs after the ripe mulberries, scrambling not merely in the first crotch, but all over the tree. They forbade Roy to climb up at all. He was too young. Mama would have a fit. That was fine with Roy. It was far better to stay on the ground and pick up the luscious berries his sisters threw down to him. More glimpses of bloomers. More of those glistening spider webs. They were all over the trees. Something about they weren't really spider webs. Then he got sick.

He vomited. Was this the first vomit in his new life? Probably not, since babies are always burping and throwing up. But it was the first full-scale stomach upheaval he could remem-

ber. Horrible. He must cry and scream almost as violently as he did in a temper tantrum. His distraught sisters tried vainly to get him to hold things down. All at once his mother, called from the front doorstep. He could not picture that particular house clearly, but it seemed the front door hung from a screened-in porch. Unlike the neat tree-trunks the house itself was left unpainted and weather-beaten. Even though it was a hot, cloudless summer afternoon his mother's commanding call seemed to come from a deep shadow.

The sisters must take him in-doors and confess all. The glazed cloth window shades in the front room were all pulled down to their maximum so you could see the exposed wooden roller they hung on. His mother had been lying on top of the bed spread, not under the covers. The bed in the front room was an iron head-and-foot-board arrangement. Only a few days ago mama had freshly repainted it in gold gilt. The paint still smelled. The white rayon bedspread, patterned in embossed white squares was rumpled where she had been lying on it.

Papa was sitting in the shadows of one corner of the room, tilting back in a cane-bottom chair, saying and doing nothing. You could smell all sorts of odors besides the fresh paint, the rubbery smell of a hot-water bottle, some sort of pungent linament. Its bottle was unstoppered and sitting on a small walnut stained wooden table near the head of the bed. There was a meally smell coming from a freshly heated corn-meal poltice.

The wooden ship-lap floor had just been scrubbed. Probably mama had scoured it this afternoon to work off nervous energy from her self-imposed imprisonment in the front room. The floor-

boards were still steamy and smelly.

His mother was not dressed in the white flannel night gown which she wore to bed even on hot summer nights, but in a blue cotton dress that she had starched and ironed early that morning. It still showed some signs of freshness but was mostly wrinkled. No doubt she had been lying on the bed, getting up, lying down, getting up.

She was in a stew. There must have been a crisis of some sort earlier in the day, and this new misdemeanor from the children threw her into a new tizzy. She declaimed to the whole state of Oklahoma that kids couldn't be depended on to keep out of wormy mulberries. He could not remember her exact words as she put him on the wrinkled bed, raced back to the kitchen, reappeared with cold wet clothes and a dishpan for him to vomit in, but she said something like this: "I know in my heart these younguns will drive me wild. I'm sick one day, and what do they do? Just what they're not supposed to do. I'm nervous, but what do I have to do? Look after a bunch of kids who don't have gumption enough to stay out of filthy mulberries. If this were our own place I would cut every one of those nasty trees down. They're as big a nuisance as the younguns are. Not fit for a thing."

She held his head down over the edge of the bed so he could throw-up in the dishpan then she lifted his head and washed his face with the wet cloth, and she declaimed some more. "I have to do everything myself. When something goes wrong who has to straighten things out? I do. The roof could cave in right over our heads and Ted would just sit in the corner and not do a thing." Then she told Roy that he was going



to have to control his stomach whether he wanted to or not. Each time she laid his head back on the pillow she held the damp cloth to his forehead a little longer. How did the scene end? Roy couldn't recall. Most likely he drifted off to sleep.

Other scenes. Mere scraps of memory. Did they happen before or after the mulberry fiasco? The same summer or some other year? Roy couldn't be sure.

A sparsely furnished room. Probably the same one he had vomitted in, but the furniture seemed moved around. His mother often moved furniture around. She was now standing three or four paces away nervously flapping a fly-swatter. The two girls were behind her, glum, and watching out of the corners of their eyes. Blanche rubbed one barefoot against her other ankle.

It was evening again (afternoon). The days chores were finished. Roy's father was sitting on the bed, not because he was tired, but because the bed was the article of furniture which served as sofa in their front room. He was about to perform one of his specialties, a little act the women didn't care for, but one they couldn't openly object to. So they watched from a distance, pretending to be bored.

"Ahh, ahh," said his father, leaning over on the bed, his eyes wide, and crawling like a bear. "Ahh," he said to Roy who was sitting on the end of the bed. "I'm gonna git you. I'm gonna git you. Ahh. Ahh. "There I've got you!" And he scooped up Roy, put him in his lap and began rocking him back and forth. Roy laughed with glee. He was being "tutored up", and he loved it.

"Humph," said his mother.

Mr. Grover let his son escape a time or two so he could

be recaptured. Roy could not remember exactly how scenes like this ended either. Probably the women folk found something to do in another room and left father and son alone. Possibly the "tutoring up" became tiresome rather fast without an audience.

But most of the time the three children played together without interruptions from the father and with really few scoldings from the mother. There were quiet sunny days when the three of them would run off to the pasture and pick wild roses and white daisies and weave them into flower chains. Beautiful flowers. Their colors enchanted Roy.. Actually the wild roses were tiny cups growing in a weed-like plant a scant three inches high. They wilted in a minute or two after you picked them. But when they are the only flowers you have ever seen they can be gorgeous. It was Rena who taught him to peel off the wild rose petals and hold them up to the light. They would glow like fire. It was Blanche who made the best flower chains. She could weave the stems together strongly enough so the trio could parade around the pasture with wreaths on their heads. Roy wanted to make the wreaths of nothing but wild roses and white daisies, the roses because they lit up so well and the daisies because they smelled so nice. But Blanche insisted they mix in the long tough stems of black-eyed Susans.

"But they smell bad," said Roy.

Nevertheless Blanche insisted on using the Susans. Waste-fully they made chain after chain, often getting tired of them and throwing them at each other. Time seemed suspended.

Another bright blob of color came into their lives, a perfume atomizer. He had no idea how such an exotic article

came to their weather-beaten house. But it was there. The little treasure was bright orange, semi-translucent and shaped in the most delicious curves he could imagine. Near its top, was painted an arrangement of dainty blue and lavender flowers. It had an exquisite brass fixture above that. And the most exciting thing hung down from the fixture.

"What is it?" said Roy.

"It's a bulb," said Blanche.

Blanche also showed the two younger ones how to squeeze it. "Just once," she whispered. "Hols it in the palm of your hand and squeeze the tiniest little bit. There. Now stop."

Ah. The odor that came out. "That's called perfume." She accented the last syllable. "All women use it. And--oh, no, no, no. Don't touch it again. Mama will smell. Put it away quick. We'll have to wait until it blows all away. Then maybe we can do it again."

The place to put it away was where they found it, underneath a collection of Mother's Day cards tied up with a twine string hidden in the bottom drawer of their mama's dresser. They left it to Blanche to determine when the scent had dissipated enough to risk another spraying. In the meantime they must play somewhere else--in the cellar, out in the "tank", or between the poplars. At last Blanche would say, "Maybe". Then they would slip back into the bedroom and cautiously ease out the bottom drawer.

Roy got to squeeze first because he was the youngest. Then, after scampering outdoors again, it would be Rena's turn. She would use both hands to do the mashing. Her eyes opened wide, and her tongue touched the corner of her mouth.



When it got to be Blanche's turn she would not merely aim the brass fixture in the air, but would hold it with great sophistication to her ear and give a tiny puff. :

Eventually they used up all the perfume, and just as eventually their mother found out about it. But she meted out justice to the two girls leaving Roy out of their fate whatever it was. Not long after she simply gave the kids the atomizer. They squirted water out of the beautiful contraption for a month or more. Finally the rubber bulb split in two.

More exotic colors entered Roy Grover's young life. Bright hues seemed to mesmerize him. Cloth remnants. Like the atomizer he had no idea how these little rainbows of cloth got to their farm. They were just there--stored in a big pasteboard box down in the storm cellar. He remembered the box had an address inked out in block capitals on one side. Rena, in an effort to teach her little brother the mysteries of the alphabet, carefully showed him how to copy each letter on the side of the box. . Roy learned quickly, and in no time at all was duplicating the complete address in pink, blue and purple wax crayons on every possible surface in the whole cellar--Mrs. Hattie Grover, Rt. #1, Grass Prairie, Okla.

The inside of the box was wonderful. Of course they were not supposed to get into things stored down in the cellar, but Hattie Grover, the school teacher, was often busy else where. So her three children fondled each resplendant piece of cloth with care. Blue backgrounds that seemed to have green and purple jewels in them. Whites, with lavender fruit printed on it. Red that would change into deeper red when you waved it in the sun light.

The material itself was an education in the luxuries of the far off world. Roy was introduced to organdy--filmy oranges--chalky, stiff whites. One scrap had an edge on it which Rena explained was "pinkings". There were several remnants of georgette. You could see through them, dark reds, swirls of blues. Roy would ask the girls again and again to tell him what the names of the weaves were, and he learned that they also had voile, moire silk, rayon, taffeta, and inlaid velvet.

Down in the cellar there was also a box of quilt scraps which their mother would dip into from time to time to make the quilts they slept under. But these were ordinary bits of cotton died in greys and browns which the kids didn't bother. Roy could not remember what happened to the box of rare remnants. Life just went on, and one day he remembered they were not there.

Then there was the day he was playing in the "tank". It must have been during a warm spell in the spring because they were supposed to spend the next day down at the county fair. Their mother was in a stew, not a stew caused from frustration and anger, but from being in a rush. She had a million things to do, and she let it be known that both her husband and the kids had to cooperate at all costs. Roy in particular must absolutely stay out of the way. "Go out and play in the tank by yourself," she ordered him quite early in the day.

What they called the tank was something that had long since been bone dry. Some past tenant of this particular farm had scooped out a hole in the earth, pushed it up in shallow banks, and planted some poplar trees around it. No doubt he used it to water a garden. Roy could not remember why the Grovers chose

to leave it dry. Yes, his mother had a young garden thriving a short distance away. But it was watered from another source. The "tank" was nothing more than a place for the kids to play : in when ordered out from under their parents' feet.

For awhile he was happy to frolic out there with his "wheel". That was a cast-off bit of machinery which his father had fitted up with an axle made of wagon rod, and Roy could pretend it was a car. But exciting things were happening at the house and he kept dropping his wheel to creep back.

For one thing his mother had made a little toy-sized school house of card board and had covered it with oatmeal, raisins and dried apricots. It was the center piece of the exhibit she had made for her class's booth at the county fair. She had hidden it under her bed. The children quickly found it and crept there every few minutes to take a peek at it. She was eager for it to win frist prize. But that could not have been what put her in a stew. She had always won first prize and there was no reason for her to worry this year.

No, her dither was caused from something else. She kept fretting about the weather. "It's going to sand storm tomorrow," she said. "I know it will. Just look at the sky. Turning brassy already."

Her husband looked at the beautiful day and said, "Oh, Hattie, quit fuming about the weather."

She spat back. "You are not on the committee to meet the governor of the |state when he flies into Grass Prairie. The first time a governor has ever been to this little mud puddle in the road. You are not the one to be out in the pasture to welcome him when his plane lands. The first time, almost,

that an airplane has landed in Grass Prairie. It's going to blow tomorrow. He'll have to cancel the trip. He'll never make it to this tacky little town. Look at the sky. it's too still, too clear, too good."

For this great event, which might get canceled completely, Hattie had to wash and iron a large number of clothes, things they hadn't worn for a year. Her husband kept saying, "What are you scrubbing that for?" She told him she knew what she was doing.

She had to kill a chicken. Roy could remember her reaching into a wire coop and pulling out a yellow hen. "Stand back," she said to the kids. "Get all the way around the corner of the house. I'm going to wring its neck. You kids don't want to see it done.. Now get back. All the way back."

They did retreat a few steps, but not far enough to miss out on anything. She took a deep breath, caught the hen by the head and began cranking around in vigorous circles. A few whirls and the hen spun off and began flopping around on the ground. "Get back," she said to the children. "Roy, go play where I told you to. Ted," she said to her husband, "you've got to take a bath. You men folks get out of the way. The girls and I will pick the chicken."

The next thing Roy remembered he was again getting tired of pushing the wheel around the bottom of the tank. He decided to give it a whiz up over the bank, through the poplar trees and spin it around the windmill. The windmill area would be slightly off-limits. His mother might think that he was again in the way, but it would be worth the risk. So he shot up, over and through

the poplars.

He stop ed, dumbfounded. Right before him, in a little grove of poplars was his papa taking a bath. He was standing up in a wash tub scrubbing the hair on his chest. But Roy paid little attention to his chest. What was all that hanging down from his middle? Two bulbs which looked like they belonged on perfume atomizers, and that other thing. Roy gaped motionless. His papa give a little jerk, spun around with his back toward Roy and said over his shoulder, "Is that you, son?"

Roy vanished back through the poplars. But in a minute he decided he might risk one more peep through the leaves. He crept up the bank and pushed the leaves aside. His father had picked up the tub and left.

The next day at the fair was one of the worst days of his childhood. He stole a little doll from the shelves of Woolworth and got caught.

They had to start so early to get into town in time for some part of the governor's reception. Even before daylight they were loading the car. His mother brought out box after box which she had to cram into the back seat. The two girls had to sit back there perched up on top of them. They hardly had room to keep their heads up straight without bruising them against the top of the car. Roy was fitted in between his mama and papa in the front seat in a little place which he must share with a sack of something. His papa's elbow kept bumping his ear when he turned the steering wheel. The gear shift handle would hit against his knees. Roy remembered the gear shift knob was made of glass, white with bright red swirls. He couldn't resist playing with it, and his parents kept slapping his hands to



make them stay put.

He was not permitted to spend the day hanging on to his parents' hands. They were both far too busy to fool with him. At first he wasn't even allowed to hang around his sisters because his mother assigned them tasks at once. He was scheduled to stay with Aunt Fern just as soon as she and Uncle Earl showed up.

Aunt Fern and Uncle Earl turned up almost at once, over by the horse pens. Such a smelly place. Roy didn't like it. Uncle Earl was entering a pair of horses in the show, and Aunt Fern was sitting out in their car beside the parade grounds' fence. She was dressed in a brown silk dress which made her own skin look muddy colored. At first she was upset when Ted brought his son over for her to look after. "Yes," she finally said. "I suppose I can take care of him if his mama is too busy."

But within thirty minutes she had turned him over to her youngest boy, Clarence. Clarence was a hulking monster at least eleven years old. His eyes were the strangest color of brown, almost red. He looked at Roy, tossed a couple of rocks in the air and said, "Phooey". Then he spotted something off in the distance and yelled, "Hey, wait for me." In a flash he had run off and deserted his little cousin. Aunt Fern had also disappeared. He was alone.

Roy let out the desperate wail of a lost child. Some women started looking at him. One of them with nice smelling face powder knelt beside him and said, "You'll tell me your name, won't you?" But Roy would not. A big man which someone said was a policeman came by. He did not kneel down any where. He stood in front of Roy with his feet spread out and spoke from a way

up over head. "If you keep up that bawling a big man with a black sack will come by and put you in it head first and throw you in the duck pond." Roy had never been so terrified in all his life. A big man would make him suffocate in a black sack. Instantly he stopped crying. The whole crowd that had collected around him began laughing.

The woman with the face powder again squatted beside him and said, "I'll betcha I can get you to tell me your name. I'll bet it's Sammy." No he told her it wasn't. "Then it's Pete. You look like Pete to me." No, Roy insisted. It was Blanche and Rena.

The woman looked puzzled, and someone said, "I think that's one of those Grover kids."

The woman with the face powder wrinkled her nose. "Well, whoever he is, he's done something in his pants."

That was true. Roy had messed himself up badly. None of the women wanted to touch him. Finally someone said, "There they come," and Blanche and Rena appeared.

What a relief to be back with them. They took him to a house several blocks from the fair grounds. A woman with an awful wart on her nose opened the door and said she had set a dishpan out on the back porch. They could turn on the waterfawcet+ back there and wash him.

But on the back porch they ran into a complication. Two boys were up in a tree next door. They started throwing things at the girls. It was ghastly. They were pelting Blanche and Rena with half-grown birds from a nest they had found. One of the fuzzy little bodies splattered on the wall right above Roy's head. The two girls screamed, picked up Roy and the dishpan

and dashed around the corner of the house to finish their job of making him presentable.

Just before noon they ran across Aunt Fern again. She said, "Heaven's sakes, isn't Hattie tending to you younguns yet? That governor stuff is all over." She seemed a little flustered. A few yards away a boy was selling balloons and Cracker Jacks. Aunt Fern sighed deeply then fumbled around in her purse, a brown leather thing with a fastener that did not work, and bought the kids a package of Cracker Jacks. In a few minutes she managed to produce their father. She began wringing her hands. "I feel so terrible about these poor little chullern. Poor things. Look at their dirty little feet. Poor little blistered toes. No shoes. I don't care what Hattie says I'm going to take them straight to Big Mama. At least Big Mama can give them something decent to eat."

The children became apprehensive. They knew that the woman Aunt Fern was calling Big Mama was the one they must, more properly, call Grandma Grover. And they knew their mother would not like it all if they were left with Grandma Grover. Blanche quickly said as much. Aunt Fern sighed again and said, "Oh, the family row. Well, I won't have a thing to do with it." With that she disappeared.

Their papa took them back to their car. The sun had heated the metal so that now they could not touch the fenders without jerking their hands away. No boxes were left inside, and the glazed leather cushions were hot and dusty to sit on. Their father found a paper sack, took out some fried chicken and biscuits and began feeding the children. He asked if they had seen the airplane.

No they hadn't. What airplane? Where was it? How big was it? What color? Could you touch it, and is it still there? Their father gave them a few meager answers, something about the World War, and it left a little while ago.

The day was breathlessly still. Their papa oopened up all four car doors so that any stray breeze would be able to pass through. He swatted at the flies and instructed the children to save the paper sack. They might need it for something. Impulsively he said. "Let's go over to the Morrises. Mrs. Morris is an awfully fine woman. She'll take care of you kids."

Roy could remember parts of the Morris house. But it was difficult to distinguish between what he remembered from that day's visit and what he had been told about it and what he had seen later on. From that day he could recall some gray stucco walls, some white, outdoor window frames with some freshly painted black screens placed inside of them.

He could remember his father approached the house with great respect. He called, "Hello," from the middle of the front yard instead of going all the way up on the front porch and knocking on the door.

He could recall Mrs. Morris, a little woman with black hair and black eyes. She seemed to stand very straight and always in the middle of things. Roy remembered her standing in the middle of the front yard where she talked with Mr. Grover instead of inviting him inside. Then he remembered her standing in the middle of the back yard where she allowed the children to play. They never got inside the house that day.

Some sort of metal fence inclosed the back yard, stiff wire, crinkled ornamentally, and looped over at the top to form

a series of arcades. Inside the backyard was something even more marvelous than the ornamental wire fence, a swing. It was no makeshift hoop roped to a tree limb but was made of real chain bolted into an iron cross bar overhead and ran through specially fitted holes in the wooden seat.

The children had not advanced far enough into the backyard to even touch this wonder before a little boy shot out the back door. He had dark eyes like Mrs. Morris and was fatter but a little shorter than Roy. Rushing to the swing he screamed, "It's mines. It's mines." He spread his chubby arms to encircle the chains and pulled the wooden seat as far away from the Grover children as he could get it.

Mrs. Morris, standing in the middle of the backyard, was not in the least shocked at her son's lack of hospitality. Instead, she calmly proceeded with a very correct introduction. "Monte, this is Roy. (Later Roy was to learn the name was spelled with an 'e' but pronounced like a 'y'.) Roy, this is my little boy, Monte. Monte, I want you two to like each other. Roy is just one day older than you are, Monte. Roy was born on the fourteenth of July, and your birthday comes on the fifteenth."

Monte, still holding on to the swing said Roy smelled bad. His mother ignored this observation and went on to explain that although fifteen was more than fourteen Roy was, she had to admit, a day older. After a word or two more she left.

Monte did not stay in the backyard very long either. As soon as he was sure the Grover children were keeping away from his swing he ducked through a window right at the bottom of the house. The Grover sisters whispered to Roy that he had entered something called a basement. In a moment their little host reappeared with the reddest, shiniest toy truck Roy had ever imagined. It



was big enough for him to get into which he did, and shouting that it was his fire engine he peddled in a grand arc around the backyard. Then he scuttled back into the basement with it and reappeared, in turn, with a toy wagon, a toy boat, a rubber hunting knife, and an Indian head-dress. Suddenly, he and his stockpile of toys were gone, never to reappear.

The Grover Children were left to themselves. They longed to touch the swing but dared not do it. After awhile Rena found a pointed rock with which she drew off squares on the ground, and they played hop-scotch. But the day was reaching its hottest hour, and the hop-scotch tired them out. A thing stuck up out of the ground which Blanche recognized as a hydrant. She showed them how to turn it on and treated her little sister and brother to a drink of water. The drink was not cold, it was extremely hot and tainted with rust. The Morris backyard had no trees. There was no shade. Rena began to twist at the hem of her dress and said, "Why don't we go down to Main street?" It was a winning idea. Quietly they pushed the bolt in the backyard gate and were gone.

Main street was fun, so were the stores, all crowded with people and bulging with brand new merchandise. They pressed their noses against plate glass windows to look at grown-up womens's dresses, at little girls' dresses and little boys shirts and jumpers. Rena kept urging them to go on down to Woolworth's. She knew exactly where it was and led them there like a homeward bound cat. Not only did she know where Woolworth's was but knew how to get to the most exciting counter inside the store. She tugged them down one aisle, around a corner, and down another aisle. "There," she whispered.

The other two looked where she was nodding her head. Roy was not big enough to see where "there" was. All he could see was a different kind of wall made of thin boards, painted maroon color and ending just over his head. On top of that was a glass edging, about a hand high that circled this box-like wall. He couldn't quite see what was behind that edging of glass, and he tugged at Rena's skirt to be lifted up for a better view. When she hoisted him to her waist he sucked in his breath forcing his mouth into a big round "O". Right before him, rowed up inside the glass edging, was the biggest supply of dolls he had ever seen. It was more amazing than Monte Morris's collection of toys. All these dolls were made of extremely attractive pink material and were dressed in filmy blue skirts.

"What is it? What is it?" he asked.

Blanche explained that the pink material was called "Celluloid", and she pointed out that the blue cloth was organdy. "You remember," she said. "We had some almost like it in the box of remnants."

Roy did remember, and here was some more of it right before him. When Rena got tired of holding him up he tugged at Blanche's skirt for her to hoist him up for a prolonged view. She did, and he drank in the sight as long as Blanche would hold him up.

When at last the two girls put him down and moved on, he found a way to get separated from them. He found himself right back beside that maroon colored box, and he discovered that by tip-toeing he could reach his little hand up over the edge of glass. He felt the stiff organdy cloth. Carefully he eased it up over the glass and down. There. The pink thing was in his hand. He had him a doll. It was amazing to feel, and--uh-oh,

he had mashed a dent into it, and the dent would not come out.

Quickly, he ran to find his sisters. They would know how to get the dent out, or at least they would know what to do with his little mis-adventure.

But something went wrong. He ran straight into the skirts of Mrs. Morris. How did she get here? Roy could remember so well her skirt, a very light tan color, so summery and fresh looking, with wrinkles running up and down in rows, almost as though it had not been ironed, but not quite.

He could remember even better her sharp gasp, her quick thrust with her wiry fingers, the way she grabbed his arm and twisted it in a terrible way, turning it over and to one side so he must drop the doll.

He remembered her spitting out words. "Did you pay for that? Answer me. Did you pay for that? You didn't. You stole it. You little thief. Drop it."

The doll had already been dropped. A ring of people were around him looking at him. Their eyes bugged out. Their mouths were either open or set in a firm line. A woman darted out from behind the maroon box and picked up the doll. She clicked her tongue several times and glared at Roy. "Tut, tut, tut." Something about the dent in it.

Where were his sisters? He didn't know, except that Mrs. Morris was moving him around through the crowd. Then all three of them were out in the car.

If only he could enjoy this car. If only Mrs. Morris would keep her sharp eyes off him so he could feel its amazing upholstery and drink in its color, a clean, shiny gray. If



only he could ask questions about its quiet purr and the smooth way it glided over Grass Prairie's streets. But no. None of the three children could open their mouths. Mrs. Morris ordered the girls to sit in the back seat like little ladies which was with faces turned straight ahead and hands folded in laps. Roy must similarly sit on the wide front seat, not over toward the outside door, but close in to Mrs. Morris--not touching her--but within reaching distance if she had to let go of the steering wheel and grab him. Under other circumstances the shiny dash board with all the buttons and dials would have been a sight to see. Especially interesting was something he could see through the windshield, the sculptured radiator cap, bright, silvery metal, like an angel with flowing robes and wings.

Mrs. Morris drove them straight to the fair grounds. She seemed to know exactly where to go. Without hesitation she piloted the car inside a big wooden building where there were rows and rows of chicken coops with fat hens lying inside of them. A lot of people were there too. Mrs. Morris got out, ordered the kids to stay put, locked the doors and in a minute came back with their mama.

Mrs. Grover advanced straight to the car. Roy was terrified at her face. As soon as Mrs. Morris unlocked the car door she yanked out Roy, turned him over her knee and spanked him in front of everyone. Sharp words. "See if that will teach you to behave. A bad boy." More words about being behind iron bars and policemen who watch over you. A declaration about all the people witnessing that she had spanked him.

They had to wait very quietly and a very long time out in their own car before it was time to go home. The sun was setting

over the prairie when they got home. The spring fair was over.

A little later on school was out, and Roy no longer spent the middle of the day riding the row-crop lister perched in his dad's lap. His mother was now at home all day long. Immediately she started the household off in a new direction. She spent the first few days washing and scrubbing and rearranging the furniture. Then she ordered an incubator through the mail order catalogue, one that would hatch a hundred baby chicks at a time. It was heated by kerosene, and in their first trial they scorched all the eggs.

She also bought, on the installment plan, an upright piano and arranged for Blanche to take piano lessons with a woman who wore extremely short dresses and black patten leather shoes which buttoned across the arch.

Her main reform was to get the family going to the neighborhood church regularly. In the past she had been lax about attending the service held in a little building in the middle of a pasture that was a quarter of a mile passed the schoolhouse. Roy remembered being taken to a tiny little room in the back of this church. There they had to be extremely quiet while a woman told them how wonderful Sunday School was. He and his sisters were crammed in with a swarm of other small children. Where did so many come from?

Two or three of the children looked different. They had shiney black hair. It reminded Roy of the music teacher's patten leather shoes. Rena whispered that they were full-blooded Indians. When, at last, the woman was through praising Sunday School they were allowed to get up. Roy felt like he had been pressed inside a trunk, but he was not permitted to dash outside to

play. Blanche whispered that they must now go into the big room for the sermon.

"What's a sermon?"

"You're too young to understand," said Blanche.

In front was a place called a stage. Blanche was excited to see her music teacher there, short dress and all. She was seated at the piano ready to play it. Three other people were up there too, sitting quietly with their hands folded in their laps, two men and a woman. The men were strangers, but the woman Roy knew perfectly well. She was grandma Grover, their father's mother.

It was such a puzzling situation. Roy knew they were not supposed to like her. His mother had so often drilled it into her children that this old hussy was so dreadful it wasn't even safe to be around her. But the problem was she was wearing the most beautifully colored hat Roy had ever seen. It wasn't quite orange, it wasn't quite pink. It glowed with intense brilliance because his grandmother's hair was dark, almost as black as the Indian kids' hair back in the Sunday School room. Her skin looked light, and he knew that her eyes were gray, but her dress was a sparkling black color. Every time she moved the least bit it would reflect light. Such dark glitter made her bright colored hat completely irresistible. He had to ask Rena what the name of the color was. She whispered, "It's salmon". She pronounced the "L". He heard someone say, "Shhhh". A woman in front turned around and frowned at them. Everything was deathly quiet. At just that moment their grandmother got up to pray.

Her prayer was long and soulful, her voice quivered. Her tone swelled in volume. She closed her eyes and tilted her head



back, making her salmon colored hat even more exotic as it moved into a shaft of light filtering through a side window. The prayer went on and on. The word, Amen, ricocheted across the reverent audience. So many people. Almost as crowded as the fair. Roy began to get restless.

He heard someone behind him whisper, "I wonder how much Indian blood that old gal's got in her?" Another low voice replied, "They never say. But I'll bet it's half."

When their grandmother finally concluded, one of the men got up to speak. What a powerful voice. He pounded one fist against the palm of his other hand. He doubled his knees up to do a quick jump. More "Amens".

At last the congregation was allowed to go outside in the brightly lit pasture. Their mother was there. Briefly she hugged her children to her and said she was so glad they had gotten back into the fold. But as soon as the preacher, the one with the powerful voice, came out she rushed over to talk to him. Her voice came out in high nervous tones. It seemed she could not break away from him. Compulsively she talked on and on.

People around the children were marveling at the good turnout. Someone said, yes, it was the fine speaker. All the women were calling each other "sister", and the men were using the word "brother" for any and everyone. Finally the crowd thinned out. Roy saw his grandmother, and her hat, walk across the pasture and join their tall, slender grandfather who was waiting in his nice looking car. Soon almost everyone was gone but the preacher and the Grover family. Ted had his children grouped around him and was trying to keep them respectfully still.

He was muttering under his breath. Roy heard him use a strange word, "Damn". But their mother's nervous caltter went on and on. The preacher she was talking to began rubbing his thin hair. Everybody was hot and sweaty.

Finally she broke loose, and the family got out to the car, the last one left in the pasture. It would not start. Ted Grover cranked and cranked on it. He had to take off the coat to his new suit. His white shirt became soaked in sweat. Hattie began to fume. "You've flooded it," she announced. Ted called through the windshield, "Give it some spark." Whereupon Hattie became nervous and wanted to know which lever that was. She began to berate her husband because he could not start a car. "Other men get cars started, but not him," she said addressing the prairie, but loud enough for Ted to hear it. "By the time we get home the evening will be half over. We'll be dark getting dinner fixed. I can't even go to church without getting into a mess." They finally got it started by letting it sit for fifteen minutes while they fanned at the gnats.

All next week Hattie was keyed up. She planned and carried out another trip into town. Was the trip on a Thursday? Probably, but Roy could only recall that the children were not allowed to go along. "There'll be to much running around to do. Behave yourselves here at home." All day long they wondered if their papa and mama would bring them back some candy, and if so, what kind would it be.

At sundown, when the car chugged up beside the house the three rushed out to see what their parents had brought back. The back seat was piled high with groceries, the most they had ever brought back from an all-day trip to town. And yes, as

their mother stepped out of the front seat they could see she carried a little white paper bag in her hand and had a smile on her face.

"You deserve a little candy," she said, as she gave it to them. "We've got to find a way to give you a few more little treats."

The bag held some sweet jelly-like things. Blanche explained, as she delt them out, that they were orange slices. Rena waited until Roy bit into his first. She was eager to see the expression on his face. They were very good.

For at least two days the whole household was busy with preparations. Some sort of feast was going to come off because their mother made dishes they rarely had had a chance to eat before. Deviled eggs. Artfully the boiled yellows were separated, "deviled", then put back in place again. Corn simmered inside a pressure cooker sitting on the hot range stove. They baked several pies and cakes, one, made in a new pan their mother had brought back from town, was called "angel food". Roy marveled at the way the center came out hollow. It was delicious to steal bites of the icing while it was cooling in the pan.

Sunday morning everyone bathed, and the three children were warned to keep their freshly laundered clothes looking neat all day long. Again they went to Sunday School, and again they stayed for the sermon. Grandma Grover offered an even more earnest prayer than the one she had sent up to heaven last Sunday. Again she wore the astonishing salmon-colored hat, but a different minister delivered the main speech, a fat

man who mumbled his words. Their mother arranged for her family to sit on the back bench so they could slip out early. They must get back to their own house and prepare the "spread" before the crowd got there. Once more they had a tense moment when their car would not start. But on the third bout of cranking it kicked off with a loud racing noise which caused a few heads to crane and look out the door of the church-house. The mumbling fat man, laboring away on his sermon, must have been annoyed.

A few other people left the services early also and soon showed up at the Grover house ready to help get the spread presentable before the crowd would arrive. Sunday spreads occurred from time to time in the community. They were affairs in which each participating family brought samples of its own best cookery. However the hosting couple must still be out considerable extra expense. Perhaps it was from lack of money that the Grovers had never hosted such a gathering before. Perhaps it was because they seemed to stand apart from the crowd. Roy could hardly believe their own household was to be the center of so much attention. His mother must have really and truly turned over a new leaf.

It was fantastic. They placed a lot of tables end to end and covered them with a series of white table cloths so that one long banquet table stretched under the three cottonwood trees in front of their house. The things they placed on it were extravagant. Not only salads made of deviled eggs, but there was sliced ham, fried chicken, several sorts of thick gravy. There were deep red pickled beets, candied peaches, graham crackers and peanut butter. There were two dishes of salt water



taffy, both of which Roy managed to sample while none of the adults were looking.

In fact it turned out to be an interlude of license for the whole community's children. As soon as the crowd got thick the parents let the children do all sorts of things they would have spanked them for at their own tables. One man took out his pocket knife and slithered off slices of chocolate cake and passed them out to a waiting line of little boys. The cake was a new experience for Roy. Until the man cut into it the whole thing seemed like a white, fluffy snow-ball, then you saw the deep chocolate brown inside. Roy also lined up for a little sliver of lemon pie. It was covered with a thick layer of fluff that was delightful. He also got to sample a liquid from richly colored drinking glasses. Only when he drank it he discovered the liquid inside was what made the goblets look colored. They told him it was iced-tea, and as you drank it down the beautiful amber color receded and left the goblet an ordinary clear glass.

While he was making the rounds he forgot about his sisters. The delights of the table were much more important. He also paid very little attention to his numerous relatives who were arriving along with car loads of strangers. But out of the corner of his eye, and in between gulps of food, he noticed his grandma, still in her hat, and standing in the center of a circle of ladies. (Hattie was not one of them. She could be seen and heard intermittantly giving shrill instructions to a staff of helpers bringing things out of the kitchen.)

He also got a glimpse of his grandpa, gossiping in the shade of the cottonwood trees. He wore a vest over a white and blue striped shirt. His long face was broadened by a pale gray moustache. A light gray cow-lick arched up over his forehead. He seemed almost as young and wiry as men who must have been twenty years his junior.

Some cousins had arrived, and Roy avoided them. He gave a wide berth not only to Clarence, but to Clarence's older brother, Bertice. Both of Fern's boys were just too big and boisterous for him to associate with.

All at once he heard a voice which sounded vaguely familiar call out in cooing tones, "Oh, is that really you, little Roy? Oh, Honey-child, come here to your Aunt Jenny. It's been two whole years since I've seen you. You've just grown and filled out so much. I'm just going to have to hold you and squeeze you a little, Honey-child."

The first thing he knew an old woman had whisked him up in her arms and had carried him to a big straw rocker sitting in the shade of the porch.

She sat down and held him in her lap. Her stomach seemed knotty and hard, but she, herself, was the personification of tender sweetness. Yes, he knew who she was, but he remembered her more from hear-say than actual recollection. She was his grandpa's sister, really his great-aunt, and was the one who had kept him in daytime when he was one and two years old and when his mother was away teaching school.

Now she clasped him in her boney arms. "I just can't believe the way you've shot up. Such a fine, handsome little boy. Your Aunt Jenny knows you want to run and play with the other

little younguns, but I've just got to make up for lost time a little bit. It's been so long since of squeezed you."

Other ladies were sitting in other rockers on the porch. . Some one had gotten a supply of free fans which one of the Grass Prairie groceries was giving out. Roy watched with fascination as these racquet-shaped blobs of cardboard with a brightly colored Japanese temple printed on their backs swayed back and forth around him. He suddenly realized that his stomach was already bulging full even though the adults had not yet even said grace nor tasted the first courses of their meal. And it was not true that he wanted to run and play with the other younguns. Instead Aunt Jenny's lap was beginning to feel very comfortable, and her petting and cooing was a rare treat. Especially since he just then caught a glimpse of his mother, hot and sweaty from the toils of the kitchen, pushing his two sisters toward the banquet table. All three were burdened with arm loads of dishes.

Roy settled down comfortably and listened to the screams of frolicking children all around him. In a few minutes some of them were pausing in their play to form in little groups at the end of the porch and eye Roy jealously. Such tutoring up. He heard two girls hiss out the word, "Pampered". How elating to watch them turn green with envy. Roy settled back in a completely relaxed pose.

The other old ladies paused in their fanning to get interested in him. Aunt Jenny said, "They tell me this child is real smart. Listen to this. I'll bet you know how to spell

your own name, don't you, Roy?"

"R-O-Y-G-R-O-V-E-R," said Roy.

"Listen to that," said Aunt Jenny. "And he ain't quite five years old and ain't been to school at all. I hear Hattie's going to send him this fall, even if he is a year too young. Do you know how to read, too?" she asked. Roy didn't know for sure whether he did or not. He squirmed in her lap. "Well, can you read this fan?"

Roy knew that. Those fans had been strown all over the fair grounds, and he and his sisters had translated them thoroughly. "Brown's Grocery, North side of Main Street, Grass Prairie, Oklahoma," he said.

"Ain't that somethin'," said Aunt Jenny. "Just a little mite." She didn't test him further but began talking about something called a depression. And of course the ladies talked about the weather, a drought, and something about a dust bowl.

More children, mostly little girls, were hanging around the railing of the porch to scowl at this scene. Even two or three of the smallest boys had joined them.

The big collection of boys that had turned up here at his home this Sunday was worrying Roy. A few stuck with their parents, but most had coagulated into a big knot just as soon as they had arrived. This gang had been swarming all over the premises like hornets, a dart out in the pasture to tromp down the new crop of wild onions, a dart through the stock pens to do something mysterious behind the windbreak, and a dart out into the front yard, which was where they were now.

They were buzzing around in the dusty area between the

cottonwoods and the road. In the center of the swarm Roy saw a heavy-set kid with coal black hair. He recognized him as one of the full-blooded Indians who had turned up at Sunday School. The other boys were now calling him "Chief". Chief had done something that made Roy sit bolt upright in Aunt Jenny's lap and drop his jaw in amazement. Chief was ahold of the "wheel", or rather what was left of it. Not one of the boys had asked Roy if they might play with his cherished toy, they had just taken it and had dismantled it.

The bent wagon rod serving as an axle was completely gone. On top of that they had broken the cast-iron wheel itself in half. The Chief was now stomping on the two halves to see if he could break them into fours. A shout like a war-hoop went up. He had succeeded, and whirling one of the parts around his head in a big circle he threw it as far as he could.

Roy wiggled his shoulders. He shifted his weight to Aunt Jenny's other leg. Where was his mama? Why didn't she stop these boys?

And just then a little girl, a chubby little thing with blue eyes and a pink silk bow in her hair, was no more than six inches from Roy. She had bravely advanced upon the porch and was sticking out her little fingers to tug at Aunt Jenny's skirt. Aunt Jenny saw her, but instead of brushing her away she said, "Why there's little Sally. Why, hello, Honey Chile. My how you have filled out. Come to Jenny. We can just scoot over a teeny bit and make room for you up here in my lap too. Move over just a little Roy, and we'll let nice little Sally sit up here. I took care of her all last winter, and now she's just as chubby and sweet as a little girl can be."



Roy didn't like this. There Sally was, pushed right up against him. Now that this creature was along side of him she seemed bigger than he was. He bet she was already five, maybe six. She had no business pushing out a small boy like Roy. If he were to sit very still maybe she would get tired of being held tight and would go away. But it was Roy who began to squirm and Sally who sat still. Suddenly, Sally interrupted Jenny's statements about the drought and said, "I can read the whole fan." And she took the fan out of Jenny's hand, read everything Roy had said and added, "Open six days a week. Cash and Carry." Aunt Jenny sucked in her breath and said, "Ain't that somethin'."

She would have said more except that things were beginning to happen around the banquet table. Grandma Grover, in her splendid clothes, was standing about ten feet from the center portion of the table, her head was tilted back, her eyes shut. All the other people, even the gang of little boys, were closed in around the table. Their heads were bowed, and the men had their hats off. They were going to say grace.

Grandma Grover's clear voice, with just a trace of a quaver to it, began, "Our heavenly Father--"

She went on and on. Both Sally and Roy began to squirm. In a moment Sally lifted her head up and whispered in Aunt Jenny's ear, "I can say a prayer, too." And she started in, "Jesus lover of my soul--".

Aunt Jenny motioned for her to be quiet.

It was hot. Gnats were buzzing around Roy's ears. One kept trying to get in his nose. If only he could rub his nose. At last his grandma was through. There was a big commotion

around the table. People had paper plates and were dipping, forking and slicing into those beautiful mounds of food. The Chief's gang of boys had dissolved, at least temporarily, and now it was every man for himself. Each one was darting in wherever he could, loading his paper plate to the brim.

Both Roy and Sally shot out of Aunt Jenny's lap. Although Roy was so stuffed he could hardly force anything down he let some strange man pick him up and give him a bit of a watermelon. The man passed him on to some other man who held him up chest high and fed him a spoonful of stewed wonder-berries.

He would have been passed on to a third man--the adults were determined that the little ones should not be left out--but Roy wanted down. He wanted to find his mama and his sisters. For just one moment he caught a glimpse of them, all three still desperately busy shuttling food from the kitchen door to the table. Briefly he ran across his father who was squatting, paper plate in hand, at the north side of the house where the eaves were beginning to cast a little bit of shade, talking with a group of other men. It was more talk about the weather.

Roy found a dog under the table who let him pull his ears. Then he ran out behind the house and found a chicken he could chase. He was tired. He wanted to find his sisters and lie down in the shade of the poplars and go to sleep. But there was no chance of that. Right at that instant Chief and the gang of boys rushed by. They had reconvened and now dashed through the poplars and huddled together in the bottom of the "tank". They had found a place where they were almost hidden, and it was for a purpose. In a moment they started doing some-

thing they were not supposed to do, sailing paper plates in the air. One, two, three and four of the disks shot up in the air and landed over in Mrs. Grover's garden. Oh, oh, when his mother found out about this she would have a fit.

Roy made a big decision. He would tell on them. So right then and there he turned to make a dash for the kitchen door. It was an easy decision to make, first because the kitchen door was only a short sprint away, and second because he could already hear his mother's voice, high and fast-paced, topping several other women's voices all crowded inside the little kitchen.

The good idea didn't work. After no more than two steps he ran into someone. It was a tall man who seemed to have popped up from no where. Could he have followed Roy on purpose? Here behind the kitchen was a bad place to run into a man who looked like this. His sandy colored hair was thinned out so you could see the scalp, peeling from sunburn underneath. He kept his mouth open all the time. What was the matter? Couldn't he breathe through his nose? It was bent to one side. One of his big white teeth was missing. The man moved so quickly, like a cat. With one quick glide he shot out a hand and sunk enormous fingers into Roy's shoulder. Roy was whirled around. The horizon rocked dizzily so it was impossible to tell which end was up. All at once he was facing and moving toward the tank and those boys.

"Good God," the man said. "Go out and play with the boys instead of hanging around the women all the time. Get on out.

Go on. Holy shit, don't hang around with the girls. Go on!"

Roy had never heard of such an idea. That bunch of boys was the last thing in the world he wanted to be with. Somehow he must shake loose from those fingers. But now it wasn't only fingers that was pushing him along. The man had whammed him in the rear with his knee. That was too much. Roy began to cry.

"Good God," the man said. "A bawl bag. I'll give you something to bawl for if you don't git goin'. Take off. Go. Go over with those boys."

Now they were so near the tank that they were right beside a poplar tree. The man--he seemed to be able to do anything and still keep his fingers sunk into Roy's shoulder--broke off a tough, springy poplar limb and began switching Roy all over the back and legs. Nothing had ever hurt like this, and the kid wailed in sucking gasps at the top of his voice.

"I'll whip your ass all the way to town if you don't play with those boys. It won't do any good to go yelling for your mama, because I'm payin' no attention to her even if she does come out. Go on. Git movin'."

What was an ass? He had no time to ponder this question. All at once, with an extra kick on his rear, he was free, free within an arm's reach of a little boy hanging around the outer most rim of the gang of boys. Over a whole bunch of shoulders Roy could see the Chief's oily-haired head sticking up. The full-blooded Indian's eyes burned like they were lit up. Then he lifted his hand and pointed a dark finger straight at the little Grover boy.

"There's the little shit," he said. "Git him!"

In an instant Roy was surrounded with boys. They pushed, shoved, gouged and pummeled him. Someone knew just where to kick to bend his knee double. Someone else knew exactly how to grab the crotch of his pants and walk him along in the air. The whole bunch was shrieking with glee. Nothing they had done all day had exhilarated them like this. "Take his pants off," they yelled. "Throw him in the cow trough." "Rub his face in cow shit."

It was terrible to be imprisoned in the center of this whirlwind, worse yet to be moved by it. He couldn't tell where they were shoving him, by his crotch, except that they were edging him far away from the house. They must be behind the barn. At last they let his feet touch ground, and the Chief was speaking.

"Let Sammy git him," he chortled as though this were an especially bright idea. "Sammy'll clean his lister."

The shouting became delirious. From the outer edge of the circle Roy heard someone say, "We'd better watch out for the old lady Grover." "Aw, she won't do nothin'." "I don't mean his grandma. I mean his mama." But these were faint, distant voices. Here, in the epi-center of the cyclone, Roy saw himself faced with a skinny little demon, an inch shorter than he was and two or three pounds lighter. This must be Sammy. Even at the age of almost five Roy could see the cunning in matching him with this particular kid. Chief was giving him the indignity of getting beaten up by the smallest runt in the gang.

A beating was what he got. Sammy's little fists shot out



like flails. He staggered Roy with an awful blow on the nose. Nothing had ever hurt as badly before, and Roy tried to let out a wail. There was no time even for this. The next thing he knew he was on the ground, pinned there. Blood had spattered up to his eyes. He tried to cry, but Sammy was bouncing on his chest so he couldn't even get a breath. Then someone was working with the buttons on his jumper. He felt the elastic part around his waist slip down. The gang whistled and shrieked then suddenly became quiet. Roy's pants were off. The boys were either quiet, gasping or giggling. All of them had backed off several feet. Sammy had let him loose, had jumped back and was standing there, gaping at Roy's unclad middle.

"Let's make him play cow and calf," someone said. But this idea didn't go over. The boys were easing back still further. Several of them were scampering off to get lost. Sammy tossed his pants back to him. Roy managed to get up, take his pants in hand and run screaming to the kitchen. On the way he bumped into two strange women who had just come out of the back door to empty a bucket of slop. They stopped. Gasped. One of them looked over one shoulder and sniggered. The other one left her jaw hanging open. The first one said, "Look what they've done to that little old Roy."

The other one set down her part of the slop bucket and cupped her lower lip under her upper teeth. "Mmm!" she said. "Get his pants on, quick, before his mama finds him and throws a hissy." Hurredly she squatted beside Roy, shielding him the best she could while she put on his pants. But she seemed to want no more of such a problem. "Find those two Grover girls. Let them clean him up," she said in a low, urgent voice.

Then the girls were there and gasping. "Cooo," said Blanche, and Rena said, "You got your nose blooded." For a moment they could do nothing but look at him. But the women insisted they make haste out to the cow trough. "Get a move on. We'll have some fresh clothes out there as soon as you get all that blood wiped off." One of them stretched the skin of his forehead up and said, "I wonder if he's going to have a black eye?"

The two girls did the best job they could of cleaning him up although they had to keep looking around the edge of the cow trough to see that none of the boys were slipping back to bother them. But they didn't know what to do about his nose. When the woman came out with his faded, everyday jumper suit she said, "Don't do a thing. Just leave him there naked for a minute and it'll quit bleeding. Haven't you ever done this before?"

She was correct. In a few moments Roy looked presentable if you did not examine his left eye too closely and if you did not know that he had switched clothes. But the girls decided it would be best not to risk their mother overlooking these details, and they dreaded what would happen to the Sunday spread if she found out. "I think we'd better put him in the east room," said Rena. "We'd better not do that," said Blanche. "That's where all the little girls are sleeping." Rena wanted to know if that made a difference and pointed out that the best way to keep Roy out of sight until the company went home was to let him bed down and take a nap.

Finally, Blanche agreed, and they slipped him through that room's east window which was something of a problem because all the shades were drawn. Pallets, made of double layers of quilts were stretched out all over the floor including the space right below the window. However, the little girls, crowded up in bunches of twos and threes, kept sleeping away like cherubs. The room's south window was something more of a problem. It opened on to the porch where the old ladies still sat, fanning, talking and rocking. Since this window opened on the protected porch they had left the shade only partially lowered so the air would circulate better. A six inch area was plainly visible on the porch, and right there you could see the bun on the back of one old lady's hair.

As the girls tip-toed around to find a pallet with enough free space on it to bed Roy down the old lady turned and looked into the room. "Land sakes, there's a little boy in there," she said. "And he's got a black eye."

The rockers stopped creaking for a moment as the old ladies considered this. Blanche quickly pushed Roy to the far side of the dresser. The rockers started going again and so did the ladies' conversation. Apparently they didn't think it worth investigating.

Finally the two girls bedded Roy down on a little patch of quilt right at the north end of the dresser. Blanche put her finger to her lips to signal Roy to be quiet. As soon as his eyes began to droop his sisters tip-toed out of the room.

Roy tried to sleep, but he couldn't. He began to fidget. One girl over on the far side of the room raised up on an elbow

and puckered her eyebrows to better fathom what was going on over there on the far side of the dimly lit room. She was a big girl, almost as tall as Blanche. As soon as she saw Roy, she closed her lips in a tight line and swatted at a gnat. She opened her lips to blow at the gnat. Then she decided that the matter wasn't worth while and lay back down to sleep.

Roy's half of the quilt seemed like such a small area. Besides that, it smelled musty. And who was that on the other half? Why it was that little Sally, still with the pink bow in her hair and her clean little dress still neat looking. Roy did not want to be beside her. He wanted to be with his sisters.

He stood up. As a big boy of neraly five he was tall enough to see quite easily what was on top of the dresser. A lot of strange little knick-knacks were spread out there, purses and things. The only objects familiar, and therefore comforting, he could see were the kerosene lamp and the box of matches beside it. What else was there to do but reach for them. He didn't know how it happened but one of the matches caught on fire and just as unexpectedly began to burn his fingers. He had to fling it down.

It was too dark and stuffy in here. A drink of water would taste wonderful now, but he wasn't supposed to move. All he could do was stand there and fiddle with those strange new things on the dresser.

One of the old ladies on the porch said, "I smell smoke." Outside people began moving. The door to the east room flew open. Just at the same time little Sally jumped up and began screaming, "Oh, oh, my new dress is on fire!"

Immediately the room came to life, both from sleeping girls waking up and from adults rushing in. Aunt Jenny reached Sally almost as soon as the little girl began dancing up and down in fright.. Roy's mother reached him almost as soon. "What have you done?" she said as she snatched him out of the room. But she did not move him fast enough to keep him from seeing a spurt of flame shoot up the back of Sally's dress. That meant he had done something very bad.

In no time at all his mother had him out on the porch and took that firm grip on his shoulder that could only mean he was to be turned down and spanked. But all at once she stopped, looked at him in a puzzled way, then changed her grip so she could turn him all the way around and look him over.

They had little Sally out on the porch too with a scorched spot on the hem of her dress the size of a grown man's hand. All the people were crowding around her talking. But Roy's mother kept looking her boy over. In a moment she set her lips in a tight line and carefully whisked Roy through the crowd and back to the kitchen. There she found Blanche and Rena, both standing around wondering what was happening. Quickly his mother whispered to them, "Take Roy out to our car and bed him down on the back seat. Stay with him until you're sure he's fast asleep." And for Roy that was all he could remember of the Sunday spread.

Later on in the summer Roy's papa was gone for days at a time to work in the wheat harvest. These were days in which the children found they had nothing to do. For some reason the cellar was completely empty, no remnants, no pasteboard



boxes, not even crates of fruit jars. The fruit jars that mother had always saved for the summer canning, where had they gone? As for that matter why wasn't their mama busy all summer with canning?

There was something about a windmill that their papa could not get to work. Roy remembered the windmill wheel, a huge circular thing with wooden slats painted white with the tip ends red. That is, it had suddenly become huge because it was now stretched out on the ground. When it had been up on top of the windmill tower it had looked small. As he stood looking across those long wooden slats he asked his sisters, "How did it get so big?" It did no good for them to explain that it had just looked small when it was twenty-five feet up in the air. All the time it had been just as big as it looked now.

Neither was there much to do out around the barns. Everything were empty. No corn, no piles of wheat. The incubator, the one that would not work, disappeared from the hen house. And one day a man came and took most of the chickens. About mid-day he drove up in a car that did not run too well. "Where's your papa?" he asked. Blanche explained he was off working in the wheat harvest. "And where's your mama?" "At Aunt Jenny's," Rena replied. The man said very quickly, "Well, I've come to catch the chickens. You'll be good little kids and help me catch them won't you?"

They hesitated. They had not heard their mother say anything about selling the laying hens, and this man seemed like a very poor chicken catcher. He was fat and dressed in a sprucy brown suit with a green tie. But the next thing they knew he

had produced three sticks of peanut butter brittle. The Grover children could not resist. After they had gulped down the candy they chased down all but two of the oldest hens and helped the stranger tie their feet. His forehead broke out with sweat as he clumsily ~~looped~~ pieces of binder twine, which he had asked the children to hunt up for him, around the hens' boney legs. It was unbelievable, but here was a man who seemed to be afraid of chickens. Strangely enough their mother wasn't even angry when she came home and found out most of her hens were gone.

Even on Roy's birthday there wasn't much to do. Would he have a cake, he asked his mother? She said no, the best they could do was a rhubarb cobbler pie. Things had not worked out well that summer. She urged the children to busy themselves cleaning around the house and yard. But they had been raking the yard for days, and the house seemed so bare. The two front room rockers were gone. "Then practice playing the piano," their mother said. "Blanche can show you other two what she learned from that teacher." But Blanche had already re-taught over and over again, everything she had learned in her brief stint of music lessons, and she had stopped going to the teacher a month ago.

They spent the morning of his birthday making the rhubarb cobbler pie. At last it was simmering in the oven turning the whole house pleasant with its scent. Every few minutes the children opened the oven door a crack to see if it was yet brown enough on top. A car drove up. Their mother looked up from washing dishes with surprise. Grandpa and grandma Grover appeared at the front door. Grandma was dressed in a plain

brown dress, not in the least attractive. Tucked under her arm was a box. Roy's heart leaped. It might be a gift. Secretly he hoped it would be a doll, but he knew it would more likely be a toy truck or car. He advanced as far as he dared toward her arm and looked at it. It was a white box, about as high as it was long.

Hattie, rather coldly, had invited her visitors to sit down, and they had declined. Grandpa, however, did place his hat, with slow deliberation, on the bed. The bed would have been their only place to sit if they had followed Hattie's invitation.

"Where's Ted?" they asked.

"Why, working at MacBride's harvesting wheat. His own is not worth cutting."

"Where are the pigs? We drove past the barns and the pens are empty."

"Why," said Hattie a little too innocently, "Ted sold them. His three kids had to have something to eat."

Grandpa at once stated that the pigs had not been for sale, that he had left them with Ted on the condition that he raise them on the halves. He demanded to know the particulars of the sale. Who had bought them and when, and how did they take them away. Hattie explained that Mr. Morris, that lawyer down in Grass Prairie, had sent a man out to pick them up. They demanded to know what Mr. Morris had to do with it.

"He sold them for us down in Grass Prairie. They brought a good price," said Hattie.

Grandpa snorted that there was something fishy about it. He pointed out that Hattie was now saying they had been sold for "us", and it was not just Ted's doing. Grandma wanted to

know why Hattie didn't have Mr. Morris send a man out to pick up her piano instead of her father-in-law's pigs.

Words began to fly, and the children eased back into the kitchen. Plainly a row was about to come off. Besides, they must watch the cobbler and keep it from burning. One peek through the oven door and they saw it was already nicely browned. As they slipped it out to cool they heard their mother's voice get high and excited. "I bought that piano with money I earned teaching school. I'm not going to sell it."

She went on to claim that Ted had fully as much to do with selling those pigs as she had. She had sacrificed her incubator. She had sacrificed her chickens and a big part of her furniture. She had slaved trying to raise a garden that Ted had let burn up because he was too willy-nilly to climb up on a windmill tower and fix a windmill. Ted had hung on to an old car that wouldn't run, had even bought a new tire for it right at the time his kids were in the house hungry. She, at least, was going to keep a piano she had slaved for nine months in a school room.

Grandma Grover tossed the white box on the bed and shook her finger at Hattie. "What did you priss off to Grass Prairie and see a lawyer for? Cone on, fess up to it. What are up up to?"

Words kept flying around in the front room. They heard the terms, "extravagant", "spendthrift", "blow and strow". The children looked in the kitchen cabinet drawer and found spoons, sunk them into the pie and began eating. They had to blow on the bites to cool them off as they raised them out of the steaming pan. Abruptly the row stopped, and the grandparents stomped out

out of the house. As the sound of their automobile faded in the distance Hattie walked back into the kitchen, her chin tilted defiantly in the air. She was too keyed up to scold the children for dipping into the pie before she had had a chance to set the table. It was a few more moments before she remembered the white box "the old lady Grover" had tossed on the bed. "If it's a little birthday present, Roy, remember to thank her for it the next time you see her. No matter what kind of an old hussy she is a gift is a nice thing."

The box contained a pair of little boy's high-topped shoes. They were black and looked quite serviceable. Roy was flabbergasted. What would he do with them?

His mother was surprised too, and slightly annoyed. "It's another little gouge that old woman is throwing at me. She'll be blowing it all over the community that she was the one who had to break down and buy my boy his first pair of shoes." But after a moment she became practical. "If you start to school this fall you'll need them. And if they don't fit we'll take them back to O'neil's and change them."

It felt so funny slipping his feet into shoes. For the occasion his mother made him wash his feet and dry them thoroughly. She promised to buy him a pair of socks as soon as they could afford it. When he finally did get the shoes on she felt across the toes and determined they were slightly too large. "But they'll be just right by fall. Don't go scuffing them up around the house."

By night fall Roy was quite proud of his shoes and was carrying them around, box and all, with great care and was taking them out to show his sisters every few minutes. But by night

time their mother had grown very restless.

"Your papa might be coming home tonight. He's sure to remember it's Roy's birthday, and MacBride might let him off early. I feel real bad that there's no cobbler pie left."

But he did not show up that night, and it was ten more days before he came in. Roy remembered he and his sisters had already gone to bed and had about dropped off to sleep when they heard his horse gallop up outside. The car, unable to run since the first of July, was sitting out beside the house. Hattie stepped outside the kitchen to meet him. When they entered together they were talking in low tones. She placed a lighted lamp on the table and fed him a frugal meal.

The next morning their papa was very eager to play with the children even though he had only a few minutes to spare before he must gallop off to work. Again he placed Roy on the bed and pretended to be a bear that was "gonna getcha". Then he hugged both of his daughters even though he seemed awkward doing it. He was so slim and sunburned.

After he was gone Hattie told the children that she and their papa had arranged a little surprise for them. "You're going to stay over with Aunt Jenny's until about the tenth of August.

Aunt Jenny's! It would be almost as good as a real vacation, like taking a trip far off somewhere. Yet they knew the old woman lived in a big house only a few miles off.

Those were wonderful days at Aunt Jenny's. She made delicious salt water taffy and taught the girls the tricks of getting it to come out just right, but she was strict that they be saving with the sugar. Blanche and Rena also helped her can



corn, and Blanche almost blew the lid off the pressure cooker by undoing the lugs before letting the steam out. The near accident made Aunt Jenny a little nervous. There after their mother came by twice daily to check on them. Each day at sun-up they heard her gallop up on a horse they had never seen before. Hattie explained it was one Uncle Earl had loaned her. She hated to impose on Earl and Fern because they weren't too friendly to her cause. But Earl and Fern were doing it for the kid's sake. Uncle Earl also got his oldest boy, Bertice, to drive mama over in their grain truck each day after sundown. Mama was always cheerful and said nothing about the trouble.

But news of the family squabble reached the kids anyway. One day Aunt Fern drove by about noon. She was wringing her hands. "Poor little chullurn." Her look at the three little Grovers was heart rending. "No, no, I won't tell what's happened. It's terrible, too terrible for little chullurn to hear."

"Then don't tell it," said Aunt Jenny.

"Poor little things," went on Aunt Fern. "They might have to get on the stand and testify when all this gets washed out in court."

"Shut up," said Jenny. "Nobody's going to put little kids in a witness stand."

"Big Mama and Hattie has had a fight," Fern continued. And she told the details. It had happened in a wheat field, though she left out whose wheat field and why two women were in such a place. Manny Rogers just happened to drive by in his grain truck and saw them rolling around in the dust, as bad as two men. Bud drove as fast as he could to his house

to get his wife so it would be a woman who separated them. He and his wife got back too late.

"Too late for what?" said Jenny.

"They had already split up," said Fern. "And Hattie's got a black eye. Just as bad as a man."

That night when Hattie came by she did, indeed, have a black eye. Her manner was unusually casual, and she was especially cheerful to the children pretending not to see them when they gaped at the black, puffed-up spot over her right eye. But she was in no hurry to leave, and one did not get the impression she was trying to cover up this deformity. In fact she might be trying to show it off. She told the children to keep their chins up. They would not have to stay away from her much longer.

The days of August were going by fast. One day Jenny called the children too her and said, "Well, you sweet little kids are goin' to have to leave me now. This big old house is goin' to seem so lonesome when you're gone. I don't know what I'll do another winter off over here by myself. I may have to find me a little shack near some strong young person who's able to take care of me."

She told as little as possible about what had happened, but explained that Hattie and Ted were now divorced, and Hattie would not be able to teach in the local school any more, but would have to move the children a way off over by the Indian reservation and teach at Antelope Wells.

Next morning they were awakened extremely early. In fact it seemed like the middle of the night. It was Bertice, Fern's

oldest boy, who kept shaking the three kids until they were not only out of bed, but fully awake. "You younguns can't go back to sleep. Everything's ready, and we've got to get you off before we start cutting wheat."

He had all three sit up in the cab with him as he drove them back to where they lived, or rather to where they used to live. As he turned into their place the headlights of his truck picked up the cottonwoods, the porch, and then swung on over until they picked up a wagon parked at the west side of the house.

Roy had never seen a wagon loaded so high. Furniture and packages seemed to be stacked ever higher and higher. Wash tubs, washboards, and chicken coops were tied on to the sides. Bertice's headlights showed that two gray horses were harnessed to the front of this enormous load. His mama, papa and two neighbor men were adjusting ropes that fastened the load down. They thumped the sideboards and shook the frame to see what was going to fall off.

When Roy got up close to the load he saw that the piano was loaded on. The blonde oak dresser was pressing up against the backboard so firmly that it bulged. Parts of the kitchen stove, the cabinet and stove piepes were sticking out. In between all this little bottles and jars, little bundles of letters and scraps of cloth, all were saved and tucked in some where. The wagon itself tilted over to one side slightly.

His mama was saying, "No, no. We can't take anything off. Every stick of it is important. It all has to go." The neighbor man was shaking his head and wondering if his team could pull it all.

When Ted saw the children he rushed over and hugged each of them with a tight little squeeze. He explained that he would get to see them at least twice a year and maybe oftener. Then he was gone, off into the darkness.

Hattie called for the children to climb on. "We've got a lot of ground to cover today, especially for a wagon and team." Roy wondered what had happened to the car. Moving with horses and wagon was such a let-down.. His mother scolded him. "This wagon is good enough. We've ridden in worse before. Find yourself a niche up on the load and settle down. Don't get where you'll break anything. And don't fall off."

It was hard finding a niche. Everything seemed crammed solid. Blanche finally found a place close to where Hattie was going to drive. Rena nestled down between two boxes toward the rear, and Roy found a tight crack he could squeeze into about the middle. Their mama clucked to the horses. They were off.

By sun-up Hattie produced a shoe-box of food stashed away near her feet. They breakfasted on boiled eggs and strips of bacon between halves of biscuits. She had even thought to fill up some fruit jars with water so they would not have to lose time stopping and looking for drinking water. By mid morning their water supply tasted like soup. The rims of the fruit jars were gritty. The horses were showing signs of thirst. They were forced to stop anyway. They spotted a farm house, opened some gates, drove the horses around to a pond where they drank, harnessed and all.

At noon they stopped at another house. The lady there let them drive under the shade of a big locust tree in her front yard. Hattie produced another shoe-box of food. They had boiled

prunes, biscuits and fried chicken for dinner. When the last biscuit was eaten their mama produced a little paper sack and said it was a surprise. "Your Aunt Jenny sent along some of her salt water taffy." It tasted delicious.

They were still traveling when it got dark. Roy was getting tired and sleepy. Rena covered him up with a blanket she had worked loose from its packing and told him to take a nap. They had quite a bit more to go. Roy did not fall asleep as easily as he thought he would. The wagon was pulling differently, with much more of a strain. He heard his mama mutter that they must be in sand. It was now pitch dark. Only a few stars peeped out overhead. They could only feel what they were driving through. It was impossible to see anything. Hattie became anxious that the horses would not be able to make it. She hated to hit them with the whip and finally decided to get out and lead them through the sand.

At last they reached firmer ground, and Hattie was able to get back on her seat. She was in a nervous stew because she had walked through a patch of grass burrs in the darkness, and her stocking legs were full of stickers. Finally Roy dropped off to sleep.

An indefinite time later he awakened. Before he was wide awake he knew something disturbing was going on, an odor, a really bad odor, and the wagon had stopped.

His mother's voice, high and angry, was what brought him to alert consciousness. "Good Lord," he heard her say, "what have we gotten into?"

What they had gotten into was extremely obvious--skunks.

It was the most violent skunk odor he could ever remember smelling. But why had his mother stopped? If a polecat had let loose near the wagon she should be urging the horses forward, whip and all. Just then rays of light came through the weave of his blanket, and someone with no shyness whatever lefted up the hem-stitched edge. A kerosene lantern was sputtering above him, and right beside it was a full-blooded Indian, not a kid his own age, but a calm, brown-eyed adult. The adult looked at him without blinking then let the blanket drop back in place. Roy heard his mother's voice rising even shriller. She must be walking around in circles near the side of the wagon. "You mean this is the teacherage? This skunk pen? Great heavens! We can't stand it. I won't put up with it. Good Lord, I've never even heard of such a mess in all my life."

Roy threw the blanket off and looked around him. Two people with lanterns were near the wagon, the Indian, who was now examining the blonde oak dresser at the tail-gate, and what looked like a white man. Standing beside him and fiddling with the bottom of his lantern was a little Indian girl. Or was she half Indian? Two or three other human forms were off in the shadows. They seemed to be apologetic, but not especially worried, about the skunk odor.

The wagon had stopped under the eaves of a smallish house. It loomed up like a black blob against the night sky which was now lit with an intensely bright moon. The house looked like it could not be more than two rooms in size and was probably covered with weather-stripped planking. You could see the top of a stove-pipe sticking up beyond the eaves.

Rena and Blanche had already jumped off the loaded wagon,



and Roy could hear their cautious footsteps exploring across the creaking floor boards inside the house. He jumped down to join them. As he stumbled across a little wooden door-step he heard one of the human forms mutter something about, "summer-time."

"Summer-time, summer-time," his mother said. "What has summer-time got to do with it? How can any human being live in a place where you have been skinning skunks?"

Inside the scent reeked even stronger. Roy got only a glimpse of the darkened interior before he retreated to the outside and far away from the house. Through two moon-lit windows he had caught a glimpse of peeling wallpaper held on the wall by carpet tacks, of a pot-bellied stove with a smutty dish pan on top. The hard core of the odor seemed to come from the dishpan.

The white man led Hattie around one end of the house and pointed off in the distance. His mother immediately said, "I don't care what it is. We'll go over there. Anything is better than this. Come on out girls. No telling what you'll get gummed up with if you mess around this place. Come, Roy. Get back on the wagon."

Hattie prodded the horses into a quick trot and drove the wagon through a little grove of mesquites. The group of people trotted along beside the wagon. Roy could see that two of them were boys no more half a head taller than he was. In the darkness he could not make out if they were Indian or not. Whatever they were he began to feel uneasy.

They had urged the horses no more than three or four hundred yards when the mesquite thicket dissolved into a clearing

and there in the moonlight was a schoolhouse. It was square shaped, probably divided into two oblong rooms, had white clap-board walls and a dinky little bellfry on top.

The white man motioned for Hattie to pull up by the front door. This was a double opening arrangement, set back under a small porch that had a cement floor. One of the little boys was already fumbling with the door-knob and couldn't get it to turn. Someone whispered that it was awfully late at night. They heard the white man ask the adult Indian, "Pete have you got the key?"

To the sleepy boys in the crowd it didn't matter whether he had it or not. At once they began undoing ropes on the wagon and taking off boxes. Hattie tried to get them to hold off until they at least had the door open. When they paid her no attention she tried to get them to be careful. They did not noticeably change their pace. The boy who had tried the door-knob scampered around to one side of the house and in no time was climbing the edge of the slanting roof. Like a panther he advanced to the bellfry, did a little twisted summersault, then vanished inside it. A moment later they heard a latch click inside, and the front doors swung open. A chalky, musty smell came out. But it was an infinitely more pleasant odor than the skunk they had left behind, or they thought they had left it behind.

Hattie borrowed a lantern and investigated the inside. Yes, there were two rooms with blackboards and a big cast-iron stove in each, rows of desks, the iron framed kind with wooden seats that folded up. They were screwed to the floor. There would be no shoving them to one side to make room.

But Hattie saw that they could still make-do on a temporary basis. There was a nice wide space between the last row of seats and the wall, plenty of room for beds and dressers. The brick chimney to the stoves had multiple openings and they could use one of those to set up their cook stove. She became quite cheerful. In a moment she was laughing and joking with the boys and helped them put down some sleeping pallets. The white man began explaining in an apologetic voice that they hadn't expected any teacher to show up until September. Hattie apologized for having to move in early. She brushed a lock of hair out of the little girl's eyes and asked her what her name was.

When the crowd had gone and she and her children were about to bed down for the night Mrs. Grover made a little speech to her family. "Well, children, let's look on the bright side. We won't be here for more than a year at the most. Let's make the best of it."

## Part II River Terrace

Mrs. Grover did find another school. In fact she spent several years moving from place to place, always trying to locate in just a little better situation. In the early thirties she tried very hard to get a class in one of the large city's school system. But during the depression everyone was looking for something a little better, and she didn't quite make it.

In 1935 she moved away from the Grass Prairie area so she could take a job in a nice little town called Argyle. This community was a way over in the central part of the state, and it meant breaking away from all her acquaintances. Never-

theless, she packed up her family and moved. It was in this town that Blanche graduated from highschool. In the spring of '36 Hattie realized she was facing a crisis. Somehow she must find a way to get Blanche started in college the coming fall. In the mid thirties college was the big hope of all in the masses who wanted to better themselves. By 1936 Hattie was determined that not only Blanche, but all her children should get a higher education.

She spent all spring looking into every possibility. Just how much would it take to send a girl to a big place, say the State University? The answers she got from there were discouraging. She had let her mind build up fantasy patterns in which all her acquaintances stood back and marveled when she sent her daughter off to the best school in the state. But after totaling up the costs of the best school in the state she forced the day dreams out of her mind. Throughout spring she wrote letter after letter to practically every other institution of higher learning in Oklahoma. At last it seemed that she might compromise on an unlikely school. The Agricultural and Mechanical college at Sand Point had a curriculum that admitted women. Since girls were rather scarce there it was easy for them to find jobs. There was an excellent chance that Blanche could wait tables and earn her room and board.

If only her daughter could make a little extra in the summer for clothes and spending money. What could she work at? Hattie pushed her eldest daughter out to tap every business house in Argyle for a summer job, all without success. Toward

the middle of May, with time getting short, Mrs. Grover decided on a course that might be called reckless. Actually she was a little homesick and wanted to re-establish contact in the Grass Prairie area.

Letting her mind wander through the memories of the nicer people she had known back there she settled on Mr. Morris. Morris was the lawyer who had seen her through the divorce. She could not forget that he had been most sympathetic, and he had been very clever at finding a way to straighten out her finances and get his fee for handling the divorce as well. She had heard that he had become quite wealthy. Hattie was well into middle age, in fact tipping into the down-hill side of it. She knew it was silly to build air-castles of a far off wealthy man coming to her rescue. If only there was a way to use common sense. She decided there was--approach his wife.

So Hattie wrote Mrs. Morris a letter, one that was several pages long, and that eventually got around to asking this lady if she knew of any summer work Blanche could do to help earn her way through college.

For days Hattie blamed herself for sending such a letter. It was presumptuous of her. Neither she nor Ted had really known the Morris family very well, and the social gulf between the lawyer and the tenant farmer was enormous. The worst of it was she had asked that Blanche do housework all summer long. It was true she had not mentioned maid's work in so many words, but how else would Mrs. Morris interpret the letter? Housework was degrading. Why had she asked for it?

The reply came promptly. In one type written page Mrs. Morris gave the answer. Yes, she could use Blanche if she was

willing to scrub floors and wash dishes. In brief, but complete detail she outlined the hours the girl must work, where she would sleep, and how she must conduct herself in her spare time. Then there was her wages. If Blanche saved everything she earned she would have enough to get her started off at Sand Point.

Hattie's feelings were mixed. She could now get her daughter off to college, but it meant sending her away from home, probably for good, and it meant starting her off as a maid. Why hadn't Hattie been able to do something better for her?

Surprisingly Blanche liked her summer at the Morris's. The lawyer, especially, captivated her, and when fall came Mrs. Grover began a campaign to convince Rena to try for a job in the Morris household. "You're only a year behind your sister," she pointed out. "So next summer you'll have to start earning money for college too. The Morris's have done nice things with Blanche. She was lucky to get into a good moral home like that."

Mrs. Grover bore down on the need for high moral standards as often as she emphasized the need to earn money. However, Rena was a different story from Blanche. Throughout her last year at highschool she complained that there was nothing to do at home. In fact her complaints turned into quarrels with her mother. About every six weeks the two women would boil over, then Hattie would get her two remaining children cornered and give them a repentant and serious talking too. "I've had to be what amounts to mother and father to both of you. Your papa's visits get further and further apart. The whole burden of raising you has fallen on me. I haven't had time for frivolous things. I've had to stress fundamental things--morality and



determination."

At Christmas time Rena surprised her mother by coming up with a part time job during the holidays. A Mr. Brown who ran the Ford agency decided to take her on as a temporary secretary. Mrs. Grover was suspicious. Her girls were oriented toward housework. How did one of them break into a secretaryship? She took her daughter aside and quizzed her in detail on how she got the job. "You're a slip of a girl. You don't know how to type or take short hand. How did you even meet this man Brown?"

In her reply Rena said Mr. Brown had promised to teach her how to type and do bookkeeping. Her mother stomped the floor. "Teach you! No employer teaches a girl how to type for any good reason. Tell him to teach his wife."

But Rena was firm. If she could not take the job she would leave home and start rooming in a boarding house. Hattie had to give in. Rena actually did learn how to type--somehow--and by the time she graduated it was plain that her new skill would see her through college in a much more comfortable way than Blanche was having.

Blanche was left to spend another summer at the Morris's. She claimed she was looking forward to it. By late spring Mrs. Grover was faced with the fact that her two daughters would soon be away from home. Shortly before school was out she had a bad quarrel with the second grade teacher. A strained conference with the elementary school principal did not smooth things over.

Hattie was restless. Secretly she began corresponding with Mrs. Morris who was not only willing to read Mrs. Grover's

lengthy accounts of her troubles, but was quick to give advice. Mrs. Morris's letters sounded like they came from a woman who knew the answers to everything. She revealed that Mr. Morris had an aunt living over in Gloriona. Although this was far over on the east side of the state it was a nice, calm, level-headed town noted for its respectable people. Her husband's aged aunt lived in a farm house some two miles from the Gloriona school complex. Aunt Betty was approaching senility. They must put her in a rest home, and they had a reliable one picked out in downtown Gloriona. Mr. and Mrs. Morris were looking for a conscientious person to move into Betty's farm house and take good care of the premises including her furniture. Would Hattie consider applying for a school in far off Gloriona and living in the farm house?

Indeed Hattie would. Her spirits perked up. Why not move? Roy, her one remaining child would be entering high-school next fall. The nice, sedate town of Gloriona would be an ideal place for him to spend the next four years that he would be home. Hattie was given to despondent spells, and instinctively she felt Argylle had been the cause of them. Nothing had worked out for her here. She needed a change.

Letters began flying between Grass Prairie, Argylle and Gloriona. By mid summer it was all arranged. The coming fall Hattie would take care of Aunt Betty's house and furniture and would teach Gloriona's first grade. Both her daughters would be in college. As an extra token of triumph Rena, thanks to her typing skill, would be attending the best university in the state. Equally triumphal was the fact that she would be getting away from Mr. Brown, although Hattie kept her suspicions

about that man's morals to herself.

In late summer when faced with the actual moving date Hattie became restive. Should she first make a quick trip back to western Oklahoma and the Grass Prairie area? A woman who had befriended her when she taught at Antelope Wells occasionally wrote her a nice letter. It would be nice to see her once more before she dropped completely out of her life. And one of Hattie's cousins who lived south of Grass Prairie wrote fairly regularly. Recently the cousin and her husband had been sending excited letters about an oil boom scare south of town. But in the final showdown Hattie decided no one in Grass Prairie warranted an expensive visit back to the western area. So, stoically, she moved eastward without any fan-fare.

Betty turned out to be unbearably quarrelsome. Not only did she insist that Mrs. Grover take the most unreasonable measures to preserve her furniture, but she brought a cow into the bargain. "I've got to have my buttermilk once a week," she demanded. When Hattie told her that was the first she had heard of a cow the woman threw such a tantrum that the rest-home officials had to put her into a straight-jacket.

Mrs. Grover finally gave in. Roy would milk the cow, do the churning and deliver the quart of milk. In a burst of generosity she promised that her boy would do it for nothing. It made her feel guilty. Common sense told her the boy should get a little money.

So all winter Roy tended the cow and delivered the milk in his after school hours. One day in late spring Betty had moved from the rest home's main lounge to take her sun nap on the back terrace. Though everyone else had long since adjusted

to spring weather this was the old folks' first venture into the warm air. Several of them were sunning in chaise longues arranged in an irregular circle around a birdbath when Roy went out to put the milk in Betty's own hands. Betty groaned up out of her chair to take it to her personal spot in the kitchen's refrigerator. While he was waiting for her to bring back an empty bottle Roy glanced at the old fellow stretched out next to her chair. He was snoring away with a light bedspread pulled all the way up over his eyes. Originally he must have had both hands hidden under the spread, but one of them, which had been clasping a magazine, had dropped down beside the chair. The magazine had sprawled out, center spread upwards, on the flagstone terrace. How fortunate that all the other old folks were either asleep or had bad eyesight, because right there in the open spring air was a full-blown specimen of pornography. The magazine's center-spread featured a photograph of a huge, hairy-chested man in full-front pose completely naked.

Roy was infatuated. He had heard of such publications, but this was the first time he had seen one. Quickly, he looked over one shoulder then the other. In a flash he scooped up the magazine and slipped it under the front of his shirt. Betty came back with her groans and grumbles, gave him last week's bottle and went to sleep.

For a week thirteen year old Roy devoured the magazine. What amazing features it had. A photograph on every page. And he had not thumbed more than half way through before he realized something else was special. All the photographs were men, and a certain word cropped up every few pages--homosexual. He went flying to the dictionary to see what it meant. The

printed definition was not the easiest to understand, but some light began to dawn in his brain. Last year, back in Argyle, he had become infatuated with a husky fellow in the senior class who always wore knit shirts with short sleeves even in the dead of the winter. Roy thought he must be the most heavily muscled man in the world. It was impossible to keep his eyes off those fantastic bare arms.

And just last Christmas, only four months ago, when Roy had slipped and broken his thumb he had become enthralled with the doctor who had put his hand in a partial cast. He could not wait to go back to his office for the periodic check-ups. By January he had found out where the doctor had lived, what car he drove, when he left his front door, when he arrived at his office, and at what hour he could be seen driving back home. The fact that he was known to be married was an annoying complication, but in his his day-dreams he saw no reason why the doctor would not welcome the chance to skip out from his wife, who must be a troublesome bother, and run off for a few hours with him. However, he had to admit the last time he went for a check-up the doctor was extremely brief in his examination. And now, a lot of details were beginning to fit together to form a picture. Roy realized he was homosexual. The boy in the knit shirt and the doctor were not.

He imagined he saw other things of significance in this little event in his life. The most pressing one was, who was the man under the bedspread? In all his trips to the rest home he had yet to see a single person physically appealing. Who could love those old wrecks? And yet as his time to deliver the next buttermilk neared he began to imagine one of them might

turn out to be a well-preserved old gentleman. But even a well-preserved old gentleman left problems in the young kid's mind. Love was for youth. Anyone over twenty getting mushy was laughable. Yet he had to admit the doctor must be a few years over twenty, and no one could be more attractive than he.. Someone at the rest home might be an exception. If only he had paid more attention. And he certainly would the next time.

As soon as he was admitted through the home's heavy oak door with the fan-shaped window cut in the top he began looking around. Good heavens, it couldn't be any of these old codgers--sallow skin stretched glassy thin over cheek bones, or floppy dewlaps hanging under the chin. And if he was looking for a kindred soul that he could use for confidences instead of real physical loving he was equally out of luck. Not one of the old boys gave him any sort of knowing look. Everyone of them seemed wrapped up in their numerous ailments.

On top of that Betty verbally bounced on to him the minute she saw him. Snatching the milk bottle and claspng it to her stomach she demanded, "Did you take Mr. Pulley's watch the last time you were here?"

This broadside obliterated the last lingering notions of romance. He was being accused of theft, something he would never do. No. He knew nothing about anyone's watch.

"You did too," Betty stated. "I saw you through the kitchen window. You reached down and picked up something by his chair. I can describe the whole thing. My chair, the bird-bath, Mr. Pulley's chair. There, you're blushing. You did it."



Fortunately, one of the nurses appeared at that moment. "Betty," she said. "Get back to the kitchen with that milk and quite raising a row." But Betty pointed her finger straight at Roy and said, "Look how he's blushing. He did it. I'm going to get Mr. Pulley right now."

The nurse told her she was going to do no such thing. "Mr. Pulley's asleep, and you're not going to disturb him. He's always losing things. His watch will turn up some where."

If only a thirteen year old could control his blushing, turn it off like draining a hydrant. Roy knew his face was still flaming red while he claimed, even louder, that he was innocent. While he said over and over that he knew nothing about a watch, he knew in his mind that he had stolen something after all, and if he didn't watch out this whole thing was going to get mixed up with sex. And yet, if he played it shrewdly there might be a chance to get a look at this Mr. Pulley. Would he be the one an only well preserved speciman on the home's roster?

"Where is Mr. Pulley," he asked. "Let me tell him I don't know a thing about a watch."

The nurse's hand flew out in a gesture toward the door. "Go on home. Go on home. Pay no attention to this blah. Nice weather we're having, isn't it. You'll like it outside."

He never did get a chance to see Mr. Pulley. The next September he heard the man died.

And all this time he was re-reading and re-looking at the magazine. The pages were getting limp and frayed from over handling. When not in use he kept it hidden in his stack of violin music. (He had stopped practicing the fiddle a year ago) By giving

the contents careful study and reading in between the lines he came to the conclusion that the "we" it talked about meant there was a fraternity of homosexuals spread across the country, and it was possible to contact them.

Roy was determined to make the contact. Here he was fourteen, and his head was crammed with all sorts of knowledge about sex, the kind between boys and girls, and he ought to be able to break the barrier with this other kind.

The situation was especially frustrating because now he was hearing numerous references to queers and what dangerous sex fiends they were. They were little whispered phrases that he had never noticed before he read the magazine. In late spring the whispering nearly flared up into an incident. One day at school, just before the noon break was over, Barry Wagoner collected a knot of his fellow track runners around him near the gymnasium's shower room. The boys were held still as if electrified by a low-keyed hypnosis. Roy, hanging around the outer edge of the knot, heard the star track runner say, "He put his hand on my knee."

It wasn't possible to catch the rest of it without nudging toward the center of the knot, and Roy wasn't a center-of-knot type. But an hour later the gossip was spreading. A tall kid with pimples stopped however would listen and said, "Did you hear what happened to Wagoner? He had to jump out of the truck. Gee, one of those kind here in Gloriona."

By four o'clock Roy could piece most of the story together. The school's best athlete was practicing the mile sprint by running from the school grounds to the stock pens. At the stock pens a truck driver who must have been someone just passing

through, offered to give the kid a ride back to the school-house. Just why Wagoner accepted instead of continuing his mile run was not clear, but he hardly got settled into the truck's cab before the driver leaned over, put his hand on the boy's knee and said, "How about it?" The story varied at this point. Some said Barry bravely jumped from a moving truck, and others said it happened when they were stopped at a railroad crossing. Such a scandal. Eyes were bugging out. Jaws were dropping. Of course there were a few ignoramouses who asked, "What did he mean, How about it?" They were edified with low whispers in the ear.

Roy got an idea. He would make excuses to stay away from school at noon and hang around the stock yards. Yes, this was supposed to be dangerous, but how else could he find one? By now he had made up his mind what he needed more than anything else in the world was a man. He had gone even further and planned what he would do if he found one. For example if a truck driver should put his hand on his knee Roy would, more or less innocently, put his own hand on top of the truck driver's. Then he would wait and see what happened.

It was too bad he didn't have a better description of Wagoner's accoster. Gossip had him all the way from five feet to six-foot-four. Roy wasn't closely acquainted with the school's best athlete and so didn't dare ask Barry himself for a better description. He might give his plan away. It was more unfortunate that this person was supposed to be a passer-through. However, there was a faint chance he would pass through again. Any way, if he was seen at the stock pens that might mean the stock pens were the point of contact for the fraternity.

It didn't work. One trip to the stock pens and he saw there wasn't any place to hang around, no office, no nothing, just stinky pens and ramps leading up to them. Only two trucks happened to be there. Neither of the drivers paid him the slightest attention.

That afternoon the principal called him into his office. As Roy walked up to the important man's desk he became very worried. What a hair-brained idea the stock pens had been. No telling what the principal would make of it. He must, here and now, forget about wanting a man and keep his mind even more purposefully set on his studies.

But he couldn't even keep his mind off the principal's hands. Underneath his white shirt cuffs emerged tufts of red hair. Why did this big fellow have to be so handsome? Roy could hardly force his brain to follow what he was saying.

"--Grover, you're one of our best students. We'd sure hate to see any thing happen to you--" Ye gods. He was putting his hand on Roy's knee. The head of the school, yet. Forget the nonsense about laying his own on top. This was a different matter. He must not so much as move a muscle.

"--There are some things you are too young to know about. I wish I could tell you, but I can't. All I can do is explain one thing. A nice boy like you should stay away from the stock pens--"

Roy did stay away. Since he was intelligent it was easy to sink himself in his studies. Soon his grade average was close to the top in the student body. But that did not keep him from thinking he needed a man. In the spring of his junior year he heard another story, this one from a fat boy in his typing class.

The boy had made a trip to Rayo, a town larger than Gloriona, some seventeen miles away, to buy a pair of pants on sale in a department store. "--And do you know what happened? When the clerk was measuring my in-seam he jiggled the tape, well, you know where. There's no doubt about it. He was queer."

Roy was going through a fussy stage, and he thought the story was crude. He had also become less credulous, and he suspected the fat boy was lying. He told him he didn't believe it.

"Oh, yes he did," was the loud reply. The fat boy tried to bolster up his yarn by telling exactly where in the store it happened, what the clerk looked like, how old he was and details of what he was wearing.

Roy changed the subject, but in his mind he kept thinking it over. What a silly thing to do, jiggle tape in a stranger's crotch. What would it get you? Romances could not blossom into anything significant when you only have a few moments' time in a public store. A rash, offensive stunt like that would only make trouble. At least seven times a day he convinced himself it was a repulsive thing to do. There was a word for it. He had read that word several times in the latest books coming out. The clerk was "sick".

But at this time of year he was looking forward to a check his dad would send him for his summer clothes. In spite of all his reasoning why the idea was disgusting he still thought it would be worthwhile to check out this clerk. So he began to soften up his mother on the notion of buying his new clothes over in Rayo. That town was so much bigger and the selections

more stylish.

"Roy, I don't care where you buy your clothes," his mother said. "It's your papa's money. Do what you want to with it."

As he suspected his mother was no real obstacle. So he tried going a step further. Now would be the time to bring up the subject of learning to drive a car. "How will I get to Rayo?" he asked.

Hattie immediately guessed the direction of this question. She became thoughtful and decided she must stall for time. "Arrange to go over with one of the boys at school," she said. In her mind she was mulling over the names of men who might be willing to teach her son to drive. The fact was she didn't know any men that well. She had cut herself off from them.

Roy, however, didn't know any of the boys at school well enough to bum a ride over to Rayo. "I need to learn how to drive," he said, and his mother replied she would think about it.

She must think about a lot of things. This was the spring of 1940. By this time next year her last remaining child would graduate from highschool. Of course, he would go to college. With his brains it would be foolish to think of anything else. Already she was inquiring for summer and part time work which Roy could do and earn himself a nest egg. Learning to drive was something he must get under his belt soon. Hattie was still sending him down to the nursing home once a week on a horse to deliver the milk. No other boys fooled with a horse,



and the palliative that contact with an animal was good training for a growing boy didn't work for an adolescent who would soon be sixteen.

In spite of her basically practical nature there were times when Hattie could fly off into the grandiose. And now she was daring to lay the foundations for a tiny little air-castle. If she must find a man to teach Roy how to drive--it wouldn't be right for his own mother to do the teaching--then why not get the most important man in Gloriona?

Without a doubt that would be Luther Blair, owner of the "Flower of the West" flour mill (the pun was intended, but usually not recognized). Blair was also vaguely mixed up in politics. He was some sort of assistant to some state-level agricultural assistant who was an assistant to Roosevelt. Blair's name frequently popped up in the big newspapers in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Hattie had never been introduced to Blair. The few times they had passed each other on the streets the man had never given her the slightest sign of recognition. Hattie, of course, knew where he lived, in one of the newest and nicest houses in town. Everyone knew he was married to a sickly creature who must have a special housekeeper to look after her.

Many a woman in Gloriona must have been secretly preening herself for the day the poorly Mrs. Blair died. But Hattie never, consciously, let such a scheme enter her mind. She rigorously limited her self-image to one of a poor, long-suffering school teacher. And as she cautiously dug the foundations for her air-castle she told herself flatly she was doing it for her son.

First, get him a job in the flour mill. That would take care of his college nest egg. Then she would leave almost all the rest to her bright son, Roy. Her only part would be to drop a few hints that he should find a man to teach him to drive shortly before asking if he had ever gotten to know the boss himself. Yes, she knew this was stretching things to the far-fetched. The gulf between a poor boy working in a flour mill and getting the mill's illustrious owner to teach him to drive was a wide one. And due to her puritanical training and limited sex knowledge she never once saw any homosexual overtones in such a relation. In fact, homosexuality was one of those vague things she had heard of, something like Einstein's theory, that was best left very far in the distance. She only had in mind the means her boy might use to get places. If it worked it would be a small triumph for his mother.

Her plan became a necessity when Ted's check for Roy's clothing got to be far over due. Finally her ex-husband's letter arrived, checkless, and a brief note that Aunt Jenny had died and he couldn't send anything until fall.

Hattie snorted. "What has Jenny's dying got to do with writing a check? Surely that woman left enough to pay for her own funeral. On top of that there's supposed to be an oil boom around Grass Prairie." But she realized Jenny might have died penniless, because several years ago Fern's oldest son took over the old woman's farm forcing the beloved aunt to live in a shack near Ted's hated parents. Anyway, it was not the first time her ex-husband had defaulted. The best thing to do was to get Roy working as soon as school was out.

Roy, with his mother's prodding, applied for a job at

Flower of the West three weeks before school was out in hopes he could go right to work the day school exams were over. This plan was a disappointment to her son. It meant he would have no breathing spell between school and the flour mill, and the plot to check on the Rayo clerk was out of the question.

But, in spite of Roy's good name at school, the foreman, a Mr. Mallotte, hedged about taking the kid on. Mallotte looked the applicant over and shook his head doubtfully. "It's hard work. Liftin' sacks. Can you lift twenty pound sacks all day?" The inexperienced Roy asked for a chance to prove he could. "It's dusty," said Mallotte. "Can you take dust? You don't look like the type."

So there was a two-week stretch after the school term when Roy had to loaf. If only he had a little money. But he barely had change to go to a movie once a week. Too bad, because young Grover could sop up Hollywood's products in unlimited quantities. Movies fascinated him. If only he lived closer to town and had more money he could take in all that glamour and glitter every night.

Besides he had heard you might pick up a man there. The chance was slim in a hick town like Gloriona, but his reading indicated it did happen. By now Roy had heard and read much more. Quite a number of illicit magazines of all types had passed his way. He had also mustered up enough courage to ask for certain books kept in a locked, glass cage in the county library. His imagination had pieced out the gaps. Roy figured no boy his age knew more about sex except the ones who had tried it. Surely his time would come soon.

At last Mallotte sent word to Hattie that her boy could

start work the following Monday. Working hours began at seven in the morning. The problem of transportation was easily solved because Mallotte himself lived even further out of town than the Grovers, and he would come by and pick up the new-hire. However, he left word that Roy must be ready and waiting at five-forty-five. No explanation was given for the hour and fifteen minute headstart.

Monday work began. With the sun not yet up the foreman drove by in a new car, not a Chevvy or Ford, but an Oldsmobile. It was an automobile to impress anyone, a powerful grille, a long hood. Inside, both front and back seats were draped with Indian blankets. There was no chance work clothes could touch the deep rich pile of the upholstery.

Mallotte didn't even answer Roy's, "Goodmorning", but smoothly shifted gears and swung the car's headlights back to the road. He still had not spoken when they passed through the gates of the flour mill five minutes later. No word had yet passed his lips when he stopped in the number one position of the employee's parking lot. He was still silent when he passed through a heavy door leading to an inside loading area.

Except for the indefinite hum of some distant machine, perhaps a generator, the place seemed deserted. Only a couple of safety lights were on, and the stacks of flour looked spooky in the semi-darkness. By the time Roy got inside and looked around his boss-to-be had disappeared through a side door marked, "office". He would not have had any idea what to do if the night watchman had not come along. The night watchman solved the problem. For an hour they talked.

He was an old fellow about half deaf who had fallen into

the habit of talking loudly. "Mr. Mallotte is sure a fine man," he said. "Mrs. Mallotte is nice too. You'll never see a woman as nice and hard working as the foreman's wife is. I grow cucumbers. I've got a few turkeys this year too, but worms have gotten into them. Do you know anything about wormin' turkeys? I've been trying to sell Cucumbers to the pickle people, but they won't come and get them. You have to sell to some trucker, and he gets all the money. Mallotte is a mighty hard worker. Have you been working here long?"

In about fifteen minutes Roy saw Mallotte come out of the little side office. He had changed his khaki colored shirt and pants for white cover-alls, at least Roy hoped they were a true, original white, and not something that had become so impregnated with flour that you couldn't tell what color they were. The foreman still paid no attention to anyone, but disappeared behind a stack of flour. Something clicked and some lights came on. The night watchman began talking about Hitler. "I'd like to be out hunting in some of those woods over there," he said, "and run across that son-of-a-bitch. Man wouldn't you like to get your rifle sights centered right between that cock-knocker's eyes? It's a mystery to me why somebody hasn't already done it."

A motor started up somewhere in the distance. A truck drove up. Someone was talking outside. The truck left. A few more lights came on or went off. A few more doors opened and closed as the foreman went about the place doing little odd jobs. As the minutes drug on to nearly an hour Roy built up a real peeve inside himself. Was he going to have to do this every morning? Why bum a ride to go two miles an hour early when

you can walk it in thirty minutes? He must tell Mallotte that so he could get to work on his own at some sensible hour.

At last some of the other workers showed up. Roy recognized two highschool kids. Both were known as lumbering thick-heads whose chances of lasting in school all the way through graduation were very slim. They grunted at Roy then began talking about something far more interesting than a new hire. "God," the tallest one said, "I've been out all night fucking Lily. God." He placed both hands over his pelvis and rolled his hips as he rolled his eyes. "Any body can have Lily." The other workers listened to this with great interest. It was now a few minutes before seven, and all the fellows were over in one corner changing from street clothes to white cover-alls.

No one had told Roy anything about bringing white cover-alls. It meant he was going to have to work all day in khaki trousers, get caked over from head to foot and then ride home looking like he had been dipped in a barrel.

The hour of seven arrived. Everybody set about their routine jobs. They left Roy to figure out what to do all by himself. The way it worked out he would help the tall fellow who had been out all night with Lily. "I'm just not with it today," he said, and he told more about his twelve whole hours of pleasure. Roy didn't know what he meant by not being "with it", because he worked so smoothly that he soon had Roy fagged out. Every once in a while the foreman would drop by to see how he was doing, but in the entire eight hour shift plus fifty-five minutes off for lunch Mallote could not have spoken more than twenty words. When quitting time came Roy didn't know what to think of it. Could he stand this?

Worst of all he was mad at his mother. She was responsible for this flour mill job. It was just like her to push her son off into the worst work in town, exactly the way she had forced Planche into being a maid. He was going to have to get out away from his mother, to break loose from Florione. There was nothing for him here.

When the tall fellow finally told him it was quitting time Roy was, indeed, caked with flour from head to foot. He was so flustered he had a mind to set out and walk home. But he was dog tired, and he knew it was foolish to do so. So he sat around and waited until everyone switched from cover-alls to presentable street clothes. When he did get out to the Oldsmobile Mallotte made him sit on some new flour sacks so he would not muss up his Indian blankets. "Bring cover-alls tomorrow," he said.

"I won't be riding tomorrow. I'd rather walk," said Roy.

"Your mother said ride with me," Mallotte said.

When he got home his mother backed up Mallotte. "Your foreman is expecting you to ride with him, so you do it," she said. "No, you aren't going to quit your job. It pays better than some little old soda jerking mess, and I won't have it said that you are jumping from job to job. You've got to have this money for college."

She managed to borrow a pair of cover-alls from a neighbor, blue ones, not white, and forced him out to meet Mallotte next morning. Again the closed down mill and deserted buildings. Again the wait with the night watchman spinning fantasies about what he would do with European dictators. Again Mallotte holed up by himself in his little office to change clothes.



The days drug by, tired days and irksome work. Nights he was tired, too tired to think about movies, and a frolic down to Rayo seemed laughable. He was too tired to think about anything except the sticky flour he couldn't wash out of his hair, the paste which seemed to coat his whole body after taking a bath, too tired to tolerate his mother's constantly trying to cheer him up, tired of hearing her ask about people who worked there. Who cared about those hulking hill-billies? No, he had not seen Mr. Blair. Mr. Blair was nothing to him. Well, yes, he had heard the big boss hung out in an office in one of the front buildings, but what was that to the fellows loading trucks?

At last he reached Friday, that glorious day when he would get his first pay check, and, thanks to the new forty-hour-per-week law he would also get two days off. All day Saturday. All day Sunday. No matter what his mother said about saving money this coming weekend would be a period to celebrate. Maybe that trip to Rayo after all, but the pants clerk now seemed silly. Gossip about a bar where soldiers hung out attracted his maturing taste much more. No doubt about it he was no longer a kid, no longer a sucker for scare stories. If he ever lasted through this summer at "Flower of the West" he would get out and tackle the world right.

He felt better that Friday morning when he stood out by the road waiting for Mallotte to silently float by in his grand Oldsmobile. There he came. Anybody could recognize those two headlights turning off the highway. When Roy opened the freshly waxed door he was surprised to hear a cheerful voice say, "Hi. How's things this morning?"

Why, that was Mallotte speaking to him. And what had

happened to Mallotte? The foreman was a transformed man. Instead of khaki clothes, he wore gray slacks of the new, tight-weave gabardine, polished shoes, and a highly starched, blue, pin-stripe dress shirt. Not only had he left the collar button open, but the two buttons below it as well. He wore no undershirt. You could see a pleasantly thick patch of chest hair between the sides of his flaring pin-stripes. His hair was slicked up with some sort of scented tonic, and he had a smile on his face. Mallotte looked ten years younger and down-right dapper.

As soon as he swung the car back on the road he began talking in a stream to Roy. "How do you like this Olds? The radio was a damned fifteen dollars extra." One of his big fingers shot out to flip a knob. First there was a low hum, then a cracking noise, and gradually cowboy music swelled up to a deafening volume. "Don't suppose you've ever thought of getting a car of your own? One of the fellows that helps you load trucks ran across a good second-hand Studebaker. An old boy working as a section hand out of Rayo was drivin' north of town one night and ran into a horse strayed on the road. You know how a Study's grille points in front? Well, it caved that whole front in. You talk to this fellow. He got it real cheap. What kind of car do you like? Do you drive? You don't?"

Mallotte paused for a moment and gazed down the road. His body relaxed imperceptibly backwards against his soft Indian blanket. He raised his left elbow to let it rest on the frame of his open window.

The sun was coming up. It was a beautiful morning. Fresh, rarified air whipped around inside the car body. You could

see the neon lights of a roadside cafe near the edge of town. Mallotte braked his expensive car. "Tell you what let's do. Let's stop for a cup of coffee here at Walt's." He began edging off the road to pull into the little eatery. "You don't hang out at Walt's much, do you? I didn't think you did. How old are you? Well, Walt sells beer, but, hell, no one will ask you your age if you behave yourself. I know several boys around sixteen who drop in. Hell, Walt will go ahead and give you a beer. Of course this morning we can't have anything but coffee."

The minute they got through Walt's door Mallotte's lips clammed up tight. All at once some two feet's distance appeared between him and his new-hire. His face was as blank as a professional poker player's. A pretty waitress with hair falling to her shoulders in deep waves sat glasses of water in front of them. "Hilloo," she said. "What are you so dolled-up about this morning?" Her eyes slid from Mallotte to look Roy over, then back at Mallotte.

"Coffee," said the foreman. "Two coffees."

As they sipped their steaming cups a stranger would think Mallotte and Roy had never been introduced, just two men who happened to take adjoining seats at the counter. The foreman abstractly viewed the cafe's decorations, a rattle-snake skin stretched across the top of the counter mirror, a stuffed jabalina hog head mounted on a heart-shaped piece of walnut, and the inevitable taxidermist's joke, a jack-rabbit head sprouting antelope antlers.

However, if this hypothetical stranger were sharp-eyed he would notice something that would be well worth gossiping

about. The calf of Mallotte's right leg was barely touching the calf of Roy's left leg.

The touching of legs was all Roy needed. Incredible as it was, this was it. With his sophisticated reading he required nothing else to get the whole picture. Mallotte had to be extremely discrete, a married man, probably with an infant child, a responsible position in the town's biggest industry. Roy felt a wave of sympathy for him. No telling how long his foreman had kept himself damned up, not daring to break over. Why, he must have been looking Roy over long before he dropped in to apply for a job at Flower of the West. For that matter he might have been vainly looking the whole town over for years as barren as your chances were in ratty old Gloriona. What iron will Mallotte had to postpone his declaration, to wait until Roy had proved himself and until things were well under control.

Ah, he would show his boss that he was worthy of all the careful planning and not betray the situation by so much as a bat of an eyelash. There would be no such thing as embarrassing his new lover in pulic. He would ask no favors at work. And right now Roy viewed the cafe's decor with careful non-challance, even though his leg was burning. Coolly he measured his gulps of coffee so he would come out even when Mallotte would set his cup down as finished. He would be calm and ready to go-- back to the car and whatever was beyond that. And there would be no question about who would pay for the coffee. They would go "Dutch".

They did go Dutch. And when Mallotte was back in the car he seemed flustered. "It's too airy in here," he mumbled, and

rolled up his car window. "This blanket is all balled up," he added and twisted uncomfortably in his seat. These two statements exhausted his flow of conversation until they rolled into the parking lot. A different night watchman was walking around the outside of the buildings carefully looking things over, thumping at windows, pointing his flashlight beam up under eaves. The foreman mumbled something about Friday being Josh's day off. "It's chilly," he said, shrugging his shoulders. So he fastened all but the collar buttons of his shirt. Inside he fumbled with the latch on his little office door. It opened easily enough, but he still thought it needed fixing.

Even though it was the regular night watchman's day off Roy still didn't get it that morning. The foreman became so nervous he gave up trying to get passed the perfectly good door latch. In fact it was four more Friday mornings before the almost sixteen-year-old did get it. On the second Friday of July Mallote managed to get passed his office latch, to advance six or seven steps inside, to flip on the light, to walk eight or ten steps, to flip off the light, then to close in on Roy and raise his shaking arm so that it touched the kid's shoulders in two tiny areas. His high, cracking voice said, "How about it?"

It was surprising how fast and how completely the well-read Roy succeeded in worming his boss up. They separated less than a minute before they heard the first truck drive in. Mallotte's magnificent calm was noticably shattered throughout the rest of the day. Several times he was seen abstractly walking off into unmotivated distances. At other times he kicked truck tires out in the loading area or thumped stacks

of flour. Twice he disappeared without anyone's being able to find him. On three other occasions he followed Roy to a deserted corner and broke into a big grin. "God," he said, "I can't believe it's happened. God."

As for Roy he had never pitched sacks of flour with more vigor, but true to his private vow he let on like his foreman wasn't even in existence. However, about an hour before quitting time he was so startled that he let a sack slip out of his hand. It did not burst, but it got a smudgy spot on the side, something they were not supposed to let happen. The tall fellow, the one who had again been out with Lilly, said, "You know Malotte's leaving don't you?"

Roy tried very hard to make his inquiries sound casual. "Leaving? You mean he's going down to the railroad yard? He does that all the time."

"Naw. I mean he's getting promoted. A salesman or something. They're moving him up to Tulsa."

Roy lost all his vigor. Weaving over to the side of a truck he wiped his arm across his forehead and said, "I've got to get a drink of water." He was not much good for the rest of the day. Besides dropping sacks he kept taking water breaks. His real motive was to try to find Malotte. For some reason the foreman was on one of his absent stretches. Roy did not find him. But he did see his lover of brief duration again, the next morning.

Saturday morning dawned cloudy. A sultry feeling settled on the countryside. Gloriosa had gone three whole weeks without a drop of rain, and it looked like today they would get their break in the drouth. Roy awoke, mechanically dressed

and abstractly went out to the lot to milk Betty's cow. He was just squatting down to squeeze her teats when he heard a horn honk, not out in front of the house, but off by the creek where there was only a dim wagon trail.

Grover dropped his milk bucket and streaked through the thickets like lightning toward the creek. There was Mallotte. He had driven his Oldsmobile down the sandy ruts and parked it so it was invisible until you were right on it. The foreman was grinning and motioned for Roy to get in the seat beside him.

"You're mad at me, aren't chew? I should have told you yesterday morning I was going to leave. But, honest, old Blair didn't promote me for sure until noon time. I got to think of my kid. He's four years old. In a couple of years he'll be starting school. I like my family. You understand, don't you? I want to move my family away from this hick town. Why don't you leave it, Roy? Go down to Dallas or some place."

Roy could not help but notice that his ex-boss did not suggest he go up to Tulsa or some place, but mentioned a city in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, Roy let on like this all amounted to nothing. The most expressive statement he made was, "We're sure going to miss you."

When Mallotte finally drove off in his Oldsmobile Roy calmly went back to his cow. "It doesn't mean anything," he told himself. "I didn't really know him, so it's not important. Of course it doesn't mean anything."

Even though Grover finished out the summer at Flower of the West he never got to know Mr. Blair. Yes, the important man passed through the loading area a few times, and once he seemed to be looking in Roy's direction, but it's possible he



was only standing in a pose that would better exhibit his classic profile. For a man pushing fifty Blair's profile and figure attracted an unusual amount of glances. Straight as an arrow he hadn't the slightest trace of a bulge around his middle. It was rumored he would run for the state legislature in forty-two.

Although Roy finished the summer at the flour mill with no difficulty he was not re-hired the following summer. When the next year rolled around Mr. Blair had his secretary tell the Grover youngster that times were bad and the loading jobs were all filled up. It did no good for the kid to point out he was graduating and would be going to college next year.

"Oh, congratulations," said the secretary. "And they tell me you're a fine student. Well, someone will snap you up right off. You won't be out of work long."

Roy hit on the idea of by-passing the secretary. He scooted around to the loading platform and propositioned the new foreman. No luck. Perhaps people were eating less flour, perhaps Mr. Blair had a heavy drain on his pocket book, or maybe a whim hit him. The word was out. Roy was not hired.

"But why?" asked Hattie. "I thought you did so well last year. Didn't you try to get acquainted with Mr. Blair? I'll bet you let somebody push you out of the way. Don't you know you have to please people if you get ahead in this world?"

Some other employer did not snap Roy right up. At one week before the end of school he still had no prospect for summer work. Mrs. Grover became nervous. "What did you do? There must be some reason why you don't have a job and all the other boys do. Well, you are going to have to try outside of

Gloriona. Sit down right now and right Mr. Morris a letter. The Morrises have been very nice to Blanche. I know it means you'll have to leave home a few months sooner than you had planned, and I know you don't like the idea of going back to Grass Prairie. But who knows, Mr. Morris might be able to take you on as a clerk in his law office. Get the letter off right now."

As his mother indicated Roy didn't like this idea, but mostly because he didn't like Mr. Morris. What little time he had spent around that lawyer had not left pleasant memories. The best he could recall Morris had never spoken to him. He seemed to be one of those men who constantly stood off to one side and watched what other people were doing. On top of that he feared his mother was being very badly old-fashioned. What was a law clerk? Roy had read about them in Charles Dickens, but he had never heard of them in Oklahoma. So he worded his letter very carefully, "Do you have work around town that I could do?" This would let him know that he was not interested in pitching hay on one of the numerous farms Morris was said to own. Roy was nursing dreams of doing something more elevating than manual labor the coming summer.

The reply was slow in coming, five days after school was out, and it was not from Mr. Morris, but from his wife. No, they did not have any work for Roy either in town or out of it. In fact they weren't even keeping a house girl any more. (Blanche had finished college and married a year ago, and so no longer spent summers cleaning the Morris house.) But the lawyer's wife did have some advice. "There's plenty of work in the wheat harvest. Surely you can sleep at your grandmother's

house until you can get on some crew. That is healthful and outdoor work. It will be good for you."

In the same mail was a letter from his father which also mentioned the wheat harvest. Had Mrs. Morris talked to him? She seemed to be a woman who laid her plans thoroughly.

Ted wrote, "--I'm awful glad you finished highschool alright. The weather is real dry. No rain in four weeks. Nobody here has got any money. But if you want to work we'll find some crew to put you on. Your Dad, T.E. Grover."

When these letters were read both Roy and Hattie knew they were faced with a set-back. As badly as the son needed work they would have to give an emphatic no to this suggestion.

The thought of her boy spending an entire summer at her ex-mother-in-law's house curdled Mrs. Grover on the whole idea of his returning to Grass Prairie. As for the boy he pointed out the huge social difference between lowly, rural wheat harvesting and such jobs as loading flour. The fact that he would not be working at a flour mill did not prevent his pointing out that a mill was a commercial corporation where you could make contacts. No, they both agreed he should toe in and not slide back to a lowly wheat harvest job.

Both of them also hit on the same alternative. He must contact his two sisters. Of course the girls themselves would not know of work, but they were both married to promising men. Blanche was now Mrs. Clifford Skirvin whose husband worked for the Government down in Fort Boomer, Texas. Rena, a bride of three months, was Mrs. Hollis Pease, and her new husband seemed to be extremely promising. Just this spring he was getting his PhD degree in an off-beat, but exciting field, psychology.

Apparently you could use the phrase, "snapped right up" to describe the ease with which he had moved into a government job a few weeks before he had gotten his diploma--something in connection with the armed forces that were being built up.

Just what could these men do for Roy? If they were in a business you would know. They could find him a place in the store. But government work was an unknown field to the Grover family. They could only write and ask.

Dr. Hollis Pease's reply was prompt and very friendly:  
Hi Roy!

So nice to get your note. A million congratulations for finishing school with flying colors. A million regrets that I don't know of any summer openings, but there are many challenging doors being unlocked these days. We seem to be moving into a new and brighter era.

My advice is to go out into the world and face it head on. Don't think in terms of problems. Think opportunities.

There has been a slight change in my assignment. Actually I will be inducted into the Army next week. After a brief training I will be commissioned a captain and will go directly into my special field.

My best regards. Both Rena and I remember what a nice impression you made at our wedding.

Hollis.

The sentence about going into the army worried Hattie. "That's certainly something you don't want to get into," she said. "And I'm wondering what will happen to little Rena.

Where will they be living?"

Fortunately, the reply from Cliff Skirvin came the next day. It was good news.

Dear Roy,

I'm glad to hear you are looking for a job so soon after finishing school. Do not be discouraged at refusals. Have you tried everything in Gloriona? All the stores? Filling stations often hire summer help.

Blanche and I hate to see you leave your mother so soon. She will probably have a hard time adjusting to living alone. However, you two must face parting soon. It is inevitable, and perhaps a summer in Fort Boomer would be a good background for entering college this fall. You need the experience of living in a larger city. Even though Fort Boomer is not really a big place like New York or Chicago, it is the largest in the Southwest. It has taken Blanche and I quite an effort just to get used to leaving a small town.

The government has let contracts to build a new Air Force base near lake Boomer. In fact the survey crew which I head has been assigned to inspecting the sewer layouts. We will be needing some ordinary helpers, and if you get here within ten days I may be able to get you on one of the new inspection crews, holding a rod, and generally helping a surveyor. I trust you have money enough to get here. You will have to sleep on the back porch.

Little Cliff is crying for his bottle, and Blanche is urging me to put out the light and go to bed. I

hope to hear from you soon. My regards to your Mother.

Clifford A Skirvin

"Well," said Mrs. Grover as soon as she and Roy had read the letter. "Good old Cliff! Good for him even though he does come from a dump like Argylle. I always knew he was dependable. And as for my getting used to living alone that's easy. I've been taking care of that already. All you have to do is help me for a few days, then you can take right off for Fort Boomer. We'll be a little bit low on money, but I'll see that you get there and have a dollar or two for change until you get your first pay check. Be careful that you don't sponge on Cliff. He hates to loan anything."

What Hattie had been doing toward solving the problem of living alone turned out to be something Roy did not like. No, she was not going to get married. She was going to hire out as a nurse maid. The arrangements were settled when she secretly called on Mr. Blair at his office to plead for him to re-consider hiring Roy for the summer. She admitted having no business going behind her boy's back, but chances for work looked slim last week, and on impulse she had gone up to "Flower of the west" to see the important man.

"I couldn't get it clear why he wouldn't hire you, but he got around to talking about his wife. That poor woman is just recovering from a hysterectomy. You men don't know what that is. She had all her reproductive organs removed. It's made an awful effect on her."

The short of it was Hattie was going to move into a spare room at the Blair house and look after the sickly woman the entire summer. Roy was indignant. "It's glorified maid's

work," he said. "That woman will make you dust the furniture and mop floors."

Mrs. Grover would not listen to anything bad about her new employers. She insisted Mr. Blair had been "tickled pink" to get a nice, refined woman to be with his wife twenty-four hours a day. She was sure her standing in the community would not suffer because she had taken a mercy job such as this.

Hattie had made other plans which caused Roy uneasiness. His mother had arranged to sub-rent Aunt Betty's house to a newly married couple who would continue to milk the cow and take the old woman her buttermilk. The agreement had several catches, the worst was the matter of the furniture. The newly-weds had gotten a complete set of household goods from a generous uncle. Naturally, they would not think of using Betty's, so Roy must spend three or four days helping Mrs. Grover store all the old woman's things in the barn. Hattie had even picked up some barrels so they could put all gnawable items in rat-proof containers.

No, she admitted, she had not consulted Betty about this. No, she had not even written Mrs. Morris asking permission. But the old aunt would be getting a full summer's rent, so it should make her happy.

Resistance was futile. So, Roy, consoled by the fact he would soon be living in excitingly large Fort Boomer, gave in and spent three days conscientiously packing Betty's worldly belongings.

The coming change caused the boy's day dreams to run wild. He shamelessly allowed himself the luxury of stacking up tiers and spires of air-castles all the time he was shifting



musty furniture. During the noon hour he read movie magazines, and nights he blew his spare change to take in Gloriona's only cinema three times in a row. This meant he paid to see one film twice, Olga Dawn in The Lie, and the night he saw Clark Gable in Test Pilot he sat through the exciting adventure two showings.

The world was about to open up for him. His plans got grandiose. Why couldn't he set his goal on being a movie actor? Anyone in this town would laugh at the idea. But no one in Gloriona knew what it took to get to the top in the film world. He must face the fact that he did not know either. It might be silly to think that a move to Fort Boomer, Texas was a start to the film capital, but the further he moved around the world, the better were his chances of finding out how people with determination got ahead.

There really was a vague connection between Fort Boomer and the movie world. Just this month's issue of Photoplay had a candid interview with Olga Dawn. That glamorous actress admitted she had been born in a small Texas town, that her real name was Patsy Hibbets, and she had really gotten stage struck when she took a drama course at Fort Boomer's university.

Ideas began to sprout in his mind. Once he got down to Blanche's house he would keep his eyes open. Of course it would be best to keep his mouth very well shut.

The morning to leave arrived. Before breakfast Mr. Blair came to pick up the mother and the boy, to transport the mother's suitcase down to his own house and the boy's to the bus station. The big man's smile was warm, and his eyes had a vague twinkle. When he said, "How are you?" you could not tell if he was

straining to recall who you were or if he was merely keeping a descreet reserve. At the bus station Mrs. Grover kissed her boy and pressed a five dollar bill in his hand. She was still standing on the curb waving at him as the bus pulled out.

Roy felt like splurging. At the first stop on the other side of the state line he ordered a full course meal instead of a hamburger. A glass of iced tea cost him a nickel extra.

At sundown they reached the outskirts of Fort Boomer, and as they pulled under a big shed at the down-town terminal he saw Blanche and Cliff waiting behind a railed-in sidewalk.

The formalities which Cliff and Blanche performed were correctly warm and sensibly brief. Cliff made sure he had all his personal belongings and baggage off the bus. He asked if the boy had eaten and how long ago. Was he feeling all right? If the heat bothered him he should dress in looser clothing and light colored trousers. Cliff also remarked that Roy had a smudge, perhaps grease, on one side of his chin. He suggested that before they do anything else he should go to the rest room and wash it off.

When it was off Cliff and Blanche took turns asking him questions on how much he knew about Fort Boomer and the mechanics of getting around in a city of this size. Their questions dove-tailed together so cleverly you would not think these two had been married only a year. Without a doubt their minds inately ran along the same track. Cliff channeled the topics toward the right broad areas, and Blanche pried out the details.

"What did you think of my plan for you to get a government job this summer?" asked Cliff, as though Roy's letter had

not shown that he was jumping at the chance. But Blanche quickly pointed out that he should think any important matter over. It was bad policy to jump at anything.

"How had you planned to get to your job?" asked Cliff. And Blanche said, "You have to realize that in a city like Fort Boomer you can't walk anywhere. From right here at the bus station it's eight miles out to River Terrace where we live. Now if you go from downtown out to Lake Boomer where they're building the air base it's another seven miles. It's a whole five miles just getting from one side of the air base to the other. So you see right there you've covered more distance than there is between Gloriona and Rayo. You have to think about transportation. Do you drive?"

When Roy said he did not Blanche asked if he had ever worked on a car. No he had not. "Do you have any mechanical skills whatever?" she asked. He had never thought about it.

"What had you planned to major in when you go to college this fall?" asked Cliff.

This question caused Roy to hem and haw for a moment, so that Blanche had to prompt him for an answer. "You have thought of it, haven't you?"

The reception was not turning out to be as friendly as he had thought it would be. Within ten minutes these two had peeled their way down to the touchy topic which he had planned to spring on his relatives gradually, his secret scheme to become an actor. The fact that Blanche and Cliff had asked about mechanical skills was warning enough that they would blow sky high if he revealed his plan now. Caution told him to do no

more than mention something vaguely in that direction.

"I'm pretty good at literature," he said.

"What?" said Blanche.

"Uh, I like artistic things."

At this point in the conversation they had loaded Roy's suitcase in the trunk of their family car and were sitting inside, Cliff and Blanche in the front seat, the little brother in the back. The car was a gray 1936 Ford V-8. Although it was over four years old its paint job, its upholstery, its dashboard and rubber mats were so well preserved it could have come straight from the assembly line. Two or three questions back Cliff had started the motor and had been watching the traffic for a chance to pull away from the curb.

He stopped the motor.

Blanche gasped. "Oh, good gracious," she said. "Mama is to blame for this. It's a good thing we got you out away from Mama for at least a breathing spell before you have to make one of the important decisions of your life. Roy, you're going to have to be the bread winner in a family. You're going to have to get your head out of the clouds. You're going to have to start fighting your way through life right here in this street. Look out there. Do you see anything arty?"

Roy did. He saw the United Artist movie theater only one block down the street. Immortal Glory was on, a super production just recently advertised in the magazines. He hadn't expected to see it in Gloriona before fall, and here in Fort Boomer it was available in June. However, he didn't mention it.

"No, I don't," he said.

Agreement did not silence Blanche. She pressed forward along lines the two must have thought out some time before Roy arrived. Surprisingly one of these lines centered around Hattie Grover. Blanche seemed to be down on her mother.

"Did Mama give you any money?" she inquired.

Cliff was sitting very still with the knuckles of his hands white from gripping the steering wheel. "Money?" Roy asked. It was time to get mad. What his mother had given him was none of Blanche's business. Hattie had never made her son account for pennies, and he would show his sister he would not start now. It looked like he was faced with a row before he had even set foot in his sister's home. He demanded to know why she was harping about money.

"Because we have been sending Mama money. If she gave you some it came from us. On top of that Rena writes me that Mama has already written Hollis tapping him for little sums. That has to stop. And you have no business taking after your mother's bad habits. How much money have you got?"

A great deal of bluster shot loose before she convinced Roy he had little choice. "If you don't open up your billfold so I can see every corner of it you can get your suitcase out of the trunk and go home. I'll bet Mama gave you enough of our money for you to pay your bus fare back." She even forced him to turn his pockets out and show his change which after the meal at the state line was reduced to thirty-five cents.

"There's a reason for finding out how much money you've got," said Blanche. "If you get the job as surveyor's helper you will have to ride the city bus to and from work. Cliff

will be supervising an area on the north side of the air base. You beginners will be a way down by the lake. You won't even be going in the same direction, so you have to ride the bus."

To Roy's dismay there was worse to come. She revealed that the government paid only once a month. A little questioning brought out something bleaker than that. The government waited a month after your first month's work before it paid you. Blanche's assurance that it would be good when he got it didn't smooth over the fact that he was going to have to wait until August to get his first spending money. His sister pointed out he would probably have to find a Saturday job to eke out his bus fare. They couldn't advance him a loan. They didn't have it to advance.

Triumphant from seeing his five dollars and thirty-five cents Blanche settled back in her front seat and became quite pleasant. She was sorry they were going to have to rush right out to River Terrace without showing him the sights of Fort Bommer. Roy would have all summer to run around town, and Cliff must hurry home to make some adjustments on their car's tappets before it got dark. Roy could help him. It would be a good chance to learn something about an automobile engine.

During the ride home Roy was pouting too much to marvel at the density of Fort Boomer's downtown traffic, nor to gawk at the city's five tall buildings now beginning to light up against the darkening horizon.

How humiliating to have to open up his pocket book. A little more needling and he would have done exactly what his sister dared him to do, gone back to Gloriona. He would

do it yet if things got worse. To think that his first night in the city would be spent working on some greasey automobile tappets. Could he demand payment for this forced labor? No, if he did they would charge him for room and board. Helping around the house had been part of the deal for spending the summer here. A whole summer doing things that were even duller than loading flour trucks. At least during last summer's job he had had the memory of his brief affair with Mallotte. And this summer he would have nothing more romantic than tappets.

"Those buildings you see over there are the University," said Blanche tilting her finger toward the car window glass. "Roy, are you looking? I don't think Oklahoma has a single campus in the whole state as large as this one. Of course if you were to go here you would have to pay out-of-state tuition. Have you picked a college in Oklahoma yet? Roy, are you listening?"

She turned around and looked at him. "Oh," she laughed. "You should see your own face. You're in a pout. You look just like you did when you were three years old throwing a temper tantrum. I can remember it like it was yesterday, you screaming on the floor, kicking your feet and flailing your arms in the air. Thank heavens Mama had sense enough to leave you alone. You always slept it off. Do you feel sleepy yet? Remember you're going to have to help fix the car."

His temper tantrums. As though Blanche hadn't kicked the floor when she was three. How Roy wished he had been the oldest in the family instead of the youngest, then he could throw it up to his sister about her own babyhood irresponsibilities.



and right now when he had grown the hottest under the collar the Skirvins had become quite jovial. Cliff was relaxed against his seat cushion, and Blanche's peevishness had vanished. In fact they were even using up some of the precious, fleeting daylight minutes to stop and show Roy something in downtown Fort Doomer after all. They were parked in front of a huge blank area, about the size of four city blocks, where bulldozers had dished out some sort of below-street-level excavations. Roy found himself getting disgusted. What was interesting about this?

Cliff was motioning off in the distance. "That will be a ramp," he said.

What was a ramp? Roy didn't know and didn't care. No doubt his facial expression would still make Blanche laugh, but the two were now very off-hand with their sophisticated explanations.

"The clover leaf will cut through just north of the University. They'll demolish all those rattling old boarding houses you see over there on Eighth Street. This pit you see in front of us is the beginnings of an underground garage. When it's finished it will be the most modern clover-leaf in the southwest."

Roy said, Oh, but his eyes were focused across the way to two bell towers on a building in the University area. They looked like pictures he had seen of Italy. Gradually, he forced his anger to subside. He must control his temper.

However, his first glimpse of River Terrace was not conducive to a happier mood. He would not have known he was anywhere special if his sister had not sighed contentedly and

said, "River Terrace. We liked it because there's still room here. It's a friendly place, not all those crammed up people like down town."

Extra room was right. They were so far out on the edge of town that cotton fields and fruit orchards were still being cultivate amongst the freshly laid-out streets and new houses. You could even see a few post oak trees dating back to primeval times. The place had a flat look about it as though they were in a river bottom. In fact Cliff was delivering a speech about the richness of the soil and the quality of vegetables he could grow in his garden. Roy got the picture at once. When his sister and brother-in-law were assigned to a city they tried to keep their private life as near like a small town as possible. If Roy was going to get any of the advantages of Fort Boomer's cosmopolitanism he would have to ride a bus to find them.

The Skirvin house was some four blocks off a fairly important highway leading to a farm area north of town. Although it was nearly dark when they got there their little pitch-roof box covered with asphalt shingles and white siding stood out clearly on their new, bare lot.

At the front entrance Blanche pointed out to Roy that both the cupola over the door as well as the cement platform she and her husband were standing on were extras that Cliff had added himself. She was quite proud of the cupola's light fixture which you could turn on from the outside by pressing a secret switch. The little convenience helped her husband find the front door key and fit it in the latch.

Neither the platform nor its overhead cover were large

enough to accomodate three people. So, while Cliff opened the door Roy was left to stand back on the flagstones in the lawn. Blanche said her husband had also put in the lawn, the flagstones, and the flower beds under the windows. The flowers were, indeed, beautiful. Even in the semi-darkness you could appreciate the mass of early cosmos just beginning to reach full bloom.. "And when you get around to the back," she added, "you can see he built the work pit in front of the garage and put up screens on the back porch. Cliff is restless. Every minute he has to be doing something. I'm proud of the improvements he's made to our home in such a short time."

Inside the house were three rooms, all small, a tiny bath and a long, narrow back porch. Through its new screens you could see two concrete ribbons leading up to an eight-by-twelve-foot garage. A dark hole had been dug out between the ribbons. It was for sitting up under the car while you worked on it. Cliff showed how he planned to go even further with the back porch. When spare time and finances permitted he would box it in, and they would have a second bedroom. At the present it contained an army style cot down at one end. The cot was covered with a single sheet, all Roy would need in Fort Boomer's warm summer nights.

As soon as they had conducted Roy through a brief tour of their home the two Skirvins went into a synchronized routine. It was amazing how well these two worked together to regulate the details of their lives. Why no, they could not yet fix tappets on the car. It was past time for supper, and first they must get that out of the way. In fact the bulk of that chore was already done. In the tiny kitchen was a new gas

range with control knobs almost as thick as those on an instrument panel of an airplane. While Blanche pulled the small dining table out of one corner of the living room Cliff flipped off some of the control knobs and opened the range's oven. A light went on in the oven to reveal three granite-ware cooking ovals, all steaming and emitting savory odors.

Blanche put down three freshly laundered cotton napkins on the dining table. Cliff laid three plates, and his wife followed behind to place three sets of silver-ware beside them. Roy recognized these knives and forks. It was a set of in-laid Roger's ware Hattie had extravagantly bought for her oldest daughter's wedding present. In another instant Cliff had placed the three cooking ovals on cork protectors. Then in less than ten minutes from entering the house they were sitting around the table saying grace.

The meal was one of the tastiest, most wholesome Roy had ever eaten. Broiled steak and potatoes timed to the precise minute of high flavor. Spiced carrots from Cliff's early garden which he had forced in hot frames he had built on the south side of the garage. Buttered "English" peas from the same place. "Light" bread rolls which Blanche had made by the sour-dough method. Iced tea and fresh butter which they had gotten from a neighbor who kept a cow.

For dessert Cliff arose and opened the new refrigerator in the kitchen. Down in the bottom where he had removed one of the metal racks he had placed an entire ice-cream freezer, hand crank, salted ice and all. He opened up the metal core, sweating with cold, and dished out three big bowls of icecream. It was fresh peach flavor and delicious. Roy realized they had

planned and cooked the whole, complicated meal earlier in the day. In fact the complete evening was pre-scheduled almost to the minute.

After the ice-cream they allowed themselves a few moments to relax and tooth-pick their teeth. As they were leaning back in their freshly varnished chairs Cliff glanced at his wrist watch, arose, and flipped on a small, new, Philco radio. The moment of their toothpicking had coincided with the evening news cast. The Pearl Brewing Company down in San Antonio brought them terse announcements of Hitler's latest advances. When the international news was over Planche leaned across the table to whisper questions to Roy. She must whisper because her husband wanted to catch the developments in state politics even if his wife did not.

"What is this I hear about Mama moving Betty's things out in the barn?" she said. Roy wanted to know how she had heard about such a minor thing as this, and his sister proudly whispered that Mrs. Morris, all the way back in Grass Prairie, had heard of it, and she had written her faithful ex-house girl to find out the details.

"This is not fair at all to Aunt Betty. The Morrisés have been more than generous in finding a spacious, healthy home for Mama all these years she's been in Gloriona. To think that she would calously push poor old Betty's heirloom furniture out in a rat-infested barn is going plety far. Did you do any of the moving yourself? Exactly how was it packed? Is the barn tight enough to keep the rain out? Will this little, split-tailed couple that's moved in have sense enough to look after things? Why, above all, didn't she consult either Petty

or the Morrisises before she pulled such a stunt?"

She also demanded to know what those Blairs were like and why Mama had been foolish enough to move in on another man and wife. "How old is that Mr. Blair? How old is his wife? Aren't Mrs. Blair and Mama about the same age? They'll never get along. I know Mama. She'll start a row, and the whole thing will blow up. We'll be lucky if there isn't some sort of scandal."

She also wanted to know if he brought any postage stamps with him. Roy had not. "Then you'll have to pay me for some three cent stamps. After you've helped Cliff with the car you'll have to write at least three letters, one to Mama, one to Papa, and one to Rena. I'd also like you to write the Morrisises and tell exactly what happened to Betty's furniture. There's no excuse for not keeping up your correspondence. And don't forget, you'll have to hear Cliff's plans about your going down to the employment office tomorrow morning. So there's plenty to do tonight."

This statement corresponded with the end of the news cast. Cliff arose, took a shielded light bulb attached to a long electric cord from a special compartment in the kitchen cabinet and looked Roy over. "Had he brought any clothes with him that he didn't mind getting greasy? Skirvin insisted on inspecting Roy's entire wardrobe because the boy must report to the employment office tomorrow morning in sensible, clean work clothes. He was annoyed to find Grover had appeared in Fort Doomer for summer work with only one pair of work pants. It was decided that if he got them greasy tonight he would have to put them in the washing machine, hang them on the line,

and iron them early in the morning.

As it turned out adjusting tappets took only a few minutes because Skirvin had every tool, every gage, every nut and bolt rowed up as they would be needed on two shelves attached to the hinged garage doors. He even had it doped out what Roy should do--hold the light and pass him the tools as he called them off by name. Grover got the wrong wrench only twice. The time consuming part was at the end when they must brush off, wipe up and replace things in the right row.

They were nearly finished, down to the point when Cliff was eyeing Roy's pants to see if they must be washed, when Blanche called out the back door.

"Telephone for Roy. She's that Zilla Melton."

Who was Zilla Melton, and why would she be calling Roy? Blanche replied she didn't know Zilla hardly at all. "But she's a relative of the best pupil in my typing class." What typing class?

"Oh, go on. Answer the phone. It will save you money," she said.

Roy's pout deepened. A strange woman who was going to save him money. The cousin for something of another woman who was learning to type. Women. Women.

Blanche might not have known Zilla very well, but you would never have guessed it from the loud, friendly way the feminine voice twanged over the telephone. "We've got to close up and take Uncle Leon to the doctor. If I don't push him down there while I'm visiting him he'll never go. It's just like a man to let himself go and git run down. I hear you want to save on bus fare."

Bus fare. So Blanche had phoned distant acquaintances to save a bus fare. Zilla went on for several minutes about how poorly this Uncle Leon was looking of late. Roy could pick up no clue where Uncle Leon was nor what he ran that they would have to close up.



But he had terrible pains shooting down his left arm, too terrible for someone barely fifty years old.

"I'll bet you didn't know he was fifty, did you?" Yes, this strange woman was asking Roy that question. She seemed to see no reason why the whole world would not be familiar with her private life. Her country accents were too loud, too brash. Alcohol? If so, how did she even get on a telephone line leading to tee-totaling Blanche and Cliff?

She told him Leon would have to quit living alone. She hated old men living alone. No telling what could happen to him some night. Someone might rob the filling station. They might knock him in the head. (Ah. He ran a filling station.) Any way, old bachelors like him couldn't cook worth a darn. Leon was worrying her stiff. Did Roy have any suggestions?

Finally, she arranged for Grover to meet her in front of the filling station. "Eight-fifteen's okay, ain't it? I'm not used to driving around in that down town traffic. Are you? You ain't? You don't even drive? Well any way that clover leaf thing ain't finished. When it's done they say you'll be able to floor-board it, just like driving in the country. Imagine not having to spend an hour driving down town." This last sentence made her realize she had allowed only forty-five minutes to get him to the employment office. So she upped the meeting time a quarter of an hour. "You be standing out by Leon's gas pumps at eight. That'll give us enough time. Maybe." at last she hung up.

Another sample of his sister's meddling. How different things were going to be this summer from Hattie's turning him loose to arrange the details of his own life. How different was this

tiny home filled with new gadgets from Betty's fifty-year-old, but spacious farm house. The worst part was Blanche's hell-bent idea that he must be re-disciplined and made over. There was no telling what she would pry into.

Well, if she wanted to telephone the whole neighborhood to find a way to save him a ten-cent bus fare let her do so. He might need the ten cents, because he was resolved to take Blanche up on the challenge to go back to Oklahoma the next time she threw it out.

But did he have to go back to Oklahoma? The truth was Gloriona was a little rat-hole. He had broken from there and he must keep the break clean. He had five dollars in his pocket. That wouldn't get him over the whole world. But by hitch-hiking it should get him past Gloriona. Up to Tulsa. Where Mallotte was.

He liked this idea, and while his sister prodded him about the details of the telephone conversation he let a fantasy play in his mind. He would blow into Tulsa on his last penny. Tired and dusty he would knock on Malotte's door. Just how he would find his address was left unexplored. The door would open. His ex-lover's face would light up. Malotte would pull him inside. Just where his wife and baby would be was also left unexplored.

"What are you staring at? Are you in a trance? Are you forgetting about your four letters? Not three. Four. I was telling you about the stationery. I was telling you about the stamps. Are you going to day-dream all night long?"

With a burst of independence Roy told Blanche he would buy his own stamps at the post office tomorrow. Surprisingly, she didn't challenge this bit of independence. Her mind seemed to be preoccupied too. Roy noticed she was twisting her wedding ring.

Suddenly, forgetting the four letters, she plopped down

on her new, small-sized, plum-colored davenport and broached a delicate subject. "I'll bet Mama didn't give you any sex education at all, did she?" she said.

Oh my God. On his first night here she was even going to cram in a lecture on sex. Some first night in a big city.

But she did not jump into this delicate subject as blattantly as her opening sentence suggested. She started appropriately enough. Calmly she took a yellow backed book from an end table and placed it unopened on her lap. Her pose was similar to a Sunday-school teacher's who always holds a bible in hand for its comforting touch. "I'll bet Mama never told you a thing about Mrs. Margaret Sanger, did she?"

Margaret Sanger? Yes, Hattie certainly had told him about Margaret Sanger. Birth control. Planned parenthood. So that was what this big, bad, hairy lecture on sex was going to be about. Parenthood. Abstract generalities on population control, not the details at all.

She didn't even get into abstractions. She had made a brave beginning, but it seemed her mind was really on something else. With Mrs. Sanger's yellow-backed book resting in her palm she blurted out, "I--We've--I have found out we--I--cannot have children."

She sat looking blankly into space for a moment or two, then said, "But my case is not important. You young boys should know that if you mess around with a girl you're going to be flirting with parenthood. Here. I've turned some pages down in this book. I'm going to leave it out on the porch. Read it. That's all. I mean it's not all. Phew it's hot weather. I've gotten a job. A woman needs a job. It's hot. Durham's Business college. We have set up evening classes right out here in River Terrace. Mr. Durham has put me in charge of teaching typing. The local response has been real good. Girls out here who would be just

chasing boys are spending their evenings learning something worthwhile."

This lecture that had started on sex now rambled even further astray--to another one of Mama's mistakes. "Typing is useful. Mama never realized that. I remember her scraping pennies together to give me piano lessons. Fieno lessons. Now, I don't care a hoot about music. If Mama had squeezed her pennies to buy us kids an old second-hand typewriter all of us would have had a headstart on earning a living. Typing is sensible."

The way this woman harped on things sensible. Well, the sensible thing for him to do was write his mother for more money. Things might blow up here. If they did he must not get caught short of cash. Women kept mad-money hidden in their brassieres. He would find an equally good place to hide it, away from Blanche's grasp. Furthermore he would tell Hattie that she had raised a daughter to be an old bat, and the Skirvins were forcing him into a summer of slavery. Bluntly he asked Blanche where she hid her stationery.

Bluntness seemed to be lost on her. Yacking all the time she arose and set some paper in front of him. While he drained off his anger on her Thistle Linen tablet she continued to drop desultory morsels of wisdom. After finishing a sizzling bulk to his mother he penned a point-blank one to Mrs. Morris. Mrs. Morris was told she could ask his mama, personally, about Betty's furniture. He, himself, did not carry tales. In a third letter he told his father he was sorry they didn't see each other after school was out, but it looked like he would be roaming around this summer. Their trails might cross yet. And he reminded Rena that if she should hear of any jobs, be sure and notify him at once. Things here were not promising.

At last he was permitted to sulk off to his screened in

bed, but not before his sister asked to review his letters, and a row almost broke out when he refused. Before tucking himself in his cot he locked them in his suitcase. Sleep, the stuff he would need to face tomorrow's tough schedule, was slow coming. Why did sisters have to be so practical? And why did they always worry when they found out they couldn't have kids? Why didn't they just go ahead and have fun with sex?

Next morning at five o'clock Blanche shook him awake. "But I don't catch that Zilla woman until eight." "Get up," she replied. "We always get up at five."

Daylight had just broken. Only a faint line of red showed in the east, but smells of bacon and coffee were beginning to permeate the neighborhood. What early risers this River Terrace crowd turned out to be. Like farm hands. The rarified air of a new summer day carried noises of doors slamming, of cars starting--as well as the crowing of a few scattered roosters. Some city he had moved into. He even picked out the sound of milk squirting into the bottom of a bucket.

It felt like it was going to be another scorcher, and Cliff, hurrying around in the semi-darkness, was setting lawn sprinklers and tending to his several flower-beds. Blanche seemed to spend only minutes getting breakfast ready. Super efficiency in penumbral daybreak. Oatmeal, sausage and scrambled eggs on a tiny drop-leaf, apple green breakfast table. Cliff dressed in clean khaki trousers and shirt, and he had packed his lunch with a thermos of cold milk, and had set up something just off the back porch.

With slow dignity he said grace then gobbled his eggs too fast. He felt compelled to explain. He believed in chewing food with thoroughness, but today he was rushing because the few moments he would save would be his only time to show Roy something about a transit.

"Do you know what a transit is?" he asked.

Well, yes, Roy did have a rough idea. A telescope. After the quick breakfast Cliff spent a few minutes showing him one. It was the thing he had set up near the back porch.

In the increasing morning light he pointed out how the bubble showed when it was level, the way you focused, and above all, how you kept it clean. "You're about to learn a trade, so learn it right," he said. An engineer worth his salt didn't have to be told to keep clean instruments. Care and cleanliness must be second nature. He hoped Art Carnes would never have to tell him that Roy kept a dirty transit.

Art Carnes? Skirven took a deep breath. "I'm about to tell you something you've got use your head about. The Civil Service doesn't allow us to pack our survey crews with relatives. So you've got to pretend you don't know Art Carnes. Well, you don't know him. Forget I've mentioned his name."

Cliff left the subject suspended while he skillfully packed the telescopic instrument in his car. Then quite casually he said that old Art grew up at Pitts, the town east of Argyle. They were classmates in college in Oklahoma. They cut each other's hair, and even now when they could afford haircuts they still clipped each other's heads. They belonged to the same lodge and did Boy Scout work together. "He hasn't got any kids either. So we both like to work with somebody else's."

Then, just as casually, he mentioned that Art's wife, Velma, was also from Oklahoma. She was a very capable woman. She was brilliant. So brilliant she had started out as typist with the Government and in a year's time had worked up to supervisor of the Fort Boomer employment office--where Roy was going this morning. Yes, she ran the men's employment bureau, not women's. Rough and

show family preference in hiring, but after Roy filled out his application he must make sure Velma herself got it, not some underling.

"Last Friday Art just happened to turn in a requisition for a new helper."

Roy started to giggle, but Skirvin cut him off with a stern look. "You ought to realize what Blanche and I are doing for you. Instead of working in a wheat field you're going to be a surveyor. I wish I had had somebody to set me up like this the summer I was out of highschool."

Roy erased the remains of his giggle. He would try to appreciate the full extent of his brother-in-law's sacrifice.

It was the minute for Cliff to leave and take his carefully worked out route of short cuts to the north side of Lake Boomer. The thin man brushed a reveling from his starched khakis and settled in the driver's seat of the Ford. He allowed a half minute for the motor to warm up, then he was backing out. Blanche stepped to the back porch to wave good-bye. The top limb of the sun was beginning to peak above the eastern horizon. The rarified air was turning sultry. The home next door had a row of two year old cottonwood trees in its backyard. Their leaves were motionless. Roy's new chambray work shirt was already making him feel sticky and warm.

Two hours until his appointment with Zilla to save a ten cent bus fare. Zilla, the voice with the deep country accents. It would be bad enough trying to make conversation with her during the hour long ride to town, but what should he do between now and eight-fifteen?

"You're staring into nothing again," Blanche said. "Find something to do. I can't understand people just sitting and do-



ing nothing."

He was now standing in the sobering light of a new day. For one whole night he had slept on his resolution to walk right out of here, to blow, to hit the road if the Skirvins put the screws on him again. Should he really do it?

He had heard of teen-age boys hitch-hiking much further than Tulsa, from coast to coast in fact. Back at Antelope Wells the Indians and poor whites used to catch freight trains all the time.

But that freight train business was way back, five, six, eight years ago. Did down-and-out drifters still do it? How did you get on a freight? What if your hold slipped, you fell and got ground up beneath the wheels?

Hitch-hiking had its drawbacks too. Once he had caught a ride to Rayo. A fifty year old man picked him. Every girl he saw he pounded on the door of his Model A and yelled, "Wha-hoo! Country stuff!" When he wasn't talking about bedding women he talked about how to cook fried chicken. Weird. It was a relief to get rid of him in Rayo.

"Don't come in the house. What's the matter with you? Can't you see I'm cleaning up? Find something to do outside like all the neighbor boys do."

His sister was getting close to putting the screws on him, but he had to admit that merely ordering him to work outside was not reason enough to pull out and start catching freights.

But his sister was such a demon of a worker. In a few minutes time she had already righted a jillion little odd jobs. It was breath-taking how quickly she had cleaned up all evidence of the breakfast meal. Now she was throwing things right and left in the living room. Somehow their bedroom had already got-

ten arranges. And what could he do outside? Her order to work in the great outdoors sounded as though she thought any man could find something to do out there. Facts were otherwise. Cliff had already done everything possible to his precious beds of Linnies and cosmos. Roy wouldn't dare touch the dear things any way. Neither was he about to move a single bolt inside that garage. What could he do now that he was moping around in the yard?

A young man with guts would be better off roaming the countryside. The real outdoors. Big ways. Railroads. He might go hungry. He might get robbed. The police might pester him and throw him in jail. But he'd be free.

Inside he could hear Blanche talking to someone on the phone. No, not a leisurely stretch of gossip. She was putting the bite on someone named Willy to come to her "Contact Committee" that did something for deaf children.

Children. Roy did not like children. In fact he hated married life. If it weren't for the business of wedding rings he could be with Lalotte right now. The truth was he had "made" Lalotte. A seventeen year old girl who makes a man usually ends up marrying him and living happily ever after. But he had been told good-bye down by the creek. A few weeks later he had nothing but the prospect of a summer with a bitchy relative.

Ten to one Blanche would force him to go to church Sundays, would introduce him to nice girls in the neighborhood and fret for fear he would do something improper with them.

Girls. Kuts. He wanted a man. He wanted to spend a whole night with one, a whole week with one, months, years with one.

Aha. What about this Leon? This very morning he was to ride into town with a woman safely older than he was, but she would

pick him up at a fifty year old man's filling station. . bachelor. The thirty-three year age gap didn't bother him. On the other hand, it seemed exciting, especially since he might work up an affair right under his sister's nose. If only time would fly and eight o'clock would roll around. Eight o'clock. For a five o'clock riser that meant mid-morning.

Finally time drug on, and his sister stuck her nose out the door to ask what he had done and to remind him he'd better get down to Jones's. (He needed no reminding.) "And about this Zilla," she said letting her glance drop to her toe, "I think she's thirty-two. I've heard that any way." Roy got the hint. He wasn't to flirt with her. His siter didn't know that that part would be easy.

The first sight of his possible lover's abode did not seem encouraging. "Leon's" was an old filling station sitting on the edge of a quasi-important highway leading from big Fort Boomer to small and forgotten dumps in the back country. Leon's station must have sat there, as a sort of rural landmark, long before real estate developers sliced up River Terrace into suburban lots. The station was a big covered driveway and a tiny inclosed office not much bigger than Blanche's kitchen. A plate glass front window. It let you see such interesting things as racks of fan belts and radiator flush inside.

The posts holding up the covered driveway were made of knobby looking river rock cemented together and painted green. The little office was stucco, painted long ago with a coat of white, now peeling. Up front was a sign spelling out "Sinclair". Under the lettering was a green dinassaur. Someone had shot a bullet hole in his belly.

A locust tree, large and old enough to have been planted by a pioneer settler, grew behind the station. Under it was the station's grease rack. The air pressure machine which

raised and lowered it was housed in a little chicken-coop-sized structure closed with a padlock. Its tar paper roof was spattered with bird dobs. The boughs of the locust stretched to the back wall of the little peeling white office itself. A double tiered row of oil barrels all but blocked any sight of the faded paint.

Over on the far side of the locust tree was another building, again a tiny affair maybe twice as big as the dinky little office. But it wasn't commercial, rather it was a weather stripped dwelling house, probably divided into a midget-sized bedroom and kitchen. Someone had decided the dwelling must have a yard, so it was surrounded with a picket fence. Space back there was so jammed there was hardly room to squeeze between the little shanty's little porch and the fence. The fence itself was anchored to one corner of the little office. If you looked carefully beyond the fence you could see two cars parked on the far side of the station, one a Model-A Ford, the other something a few years newer.

These two buildings sat on a city block that was other wise completely bare. The bare space was heavily rutted, and you could see it was used as a parking lot. In fact, as Roy walked up a city bus drove off the highway and stopped in the rutted, vacant area behind the station. Something was wrong with its oblong mirror which should have stuck out to the front of the passenger's door on the left side. It hung down instead of up. The bus driver managed to open the door and let out his one remaining passenger. The mirror flopped crazily as the door swung out and in. Clearly Jones's station was the end of the line, and the driver was going to have to use his smoke break to fix his rear-view mirror. He got out, looked at it, flipped it disgustedly, decided he would get a soda pop first, and went inside the little office. In a moment he came out with a Grapette.

A pretty woman about thirty-five years old scooted out of the little dwelling. Carrying a white patent leather purse she hurried through the gate in the picket fence and said, "Hello, Larry," to the driver. For this hot summer morning she had dressed herself in pink crepe silk with wine colored sequins. To match her purse she wore white shoes with open toes and Cuban heels. The orange color of her hennsed hair did not go at all with the pink dress, nor did the burgandy shade of lipstick she was applying as she hurried from dwelling to station.

Mid-way to the gas pumps she spotted Roy. What ever had made her voice sound loud and gushing over the telephone was no longer in effect. Now she was just loud. "You must be that kid bumming a ride down town," she said. "You'll have to wait outside. Leon doesn't like strangers in his office while he's shutting down the cash register." When she reached the door of the little office she turned with an after thought. "--Unless you want to buy a bottle of pop. Leon might sell you one if you'd hurry up."

No, Roy did not want to buy anything, and he wondered how this woman, who must be Zilla Melton, expected to sell knick-knacks to a boy trying to save a ten-cent bus fare.

Grover caught glimpses of her moving around inside the office. Its lone, dangling light bulb switched out, and he thought, Ah, Leon is closing up. In a minute I'll see him. But a minute passed and the light switched back on again. With a flurry of pink silk Zilla ran out muttering, "Damn, damn." Over her shoulder she threw the news to Roy that they still weren't ready yet. As she raced back to the picket fence she gave the rack of oil barrels a wide berth to protect her Sunday clothes from the peril of stray smudges. She also waved again to the bus driver who stood, pop in hand, looking over the damaged mirror.

At the picket gate she repeated the "Damn", and added, "I forgot my bloomin' purse."

Apparently she had raced out of the station to get a forgotten object back in the living quarters. But she was forgetting all sorts of things. This time she had left her white purse in the station. The purse must have contained the key to the dwelling house door which she had hurriedly locked when she first scooted out.

So now it was back to the station. Once more she waved at the bus driver, and again she made a wide circle to avoid the dirty oil barrels. For the second time she told Roy to, "Wait right there." Then she ducked in the station. She emerged, this time with her white purse.

Back passed Roy she rushed, passed the oil barrels, the bus driver (giving him a smile), and frantically clawing inside her purse she got the key out by the time she reached the little house. Once inside you could hear her opening and closing drawers. You also heard mutterings. Was she actually cursing? In a moment a window in the tiny kitchen flew open, the mop of orange hair leaned out, and in a voice that would pierce a concrete wall the burgandy lips called out, "Le-on! Le-on! I can't find that damned doctor's address any where."

Time was passing. Although Roy did not have a wrist watch he guessed it must be slightly after eight o'clock. But his urge to get uneasy was offset by something far more important. At this moment the station door was opening and he was getting his first glimpse of his possible lover.

Leon Jones wasn't bad looking. He had been born with a

straight back and good figure and both were still in good shape. Perhaps his facial expression was a little soured, and the puffs under his eyes were a little too pronounced for a healthy man, but he was certainly a well-preserved fifty. Roy hitched up his trousers and brushed his hair. Did he catch a movement out of the corner of his eye? Did the bus driver do something over there with his mirror? If a slight movement did take place Roy missed it because he was doing his best to make a good impression. At first sight Jones seemed worthwhile.

Jones was in nothing like the hurry his neice was in. If something was wrong with his heart he seemed to be in no rush to have it looked into. He was going to see that every thing about his station was okay. Carefully, he closed and locked the door. He calmly turned and looked over the gas pumps. With three slow steps he walked to the Ethyl pump and jiggled the handle to see if it was locked. It was.

Then he turned and looked at more distant things. With a panoramic sweep he took in Roy, the grease rack, the bus and its dangling side mirror, the driver and the locust tree.

He lifted two fingers half way to his brow in a sort of salute to the driver, then, all at once, turned back to the Grover boy.

"You're kin to that woman that's always messing around with some sort of club work, aren't you?"

This surprise question wasn't the friendliest of introductions. But if Roy answered politely he might thaw the man out. So he decided to agree with him. "Yes," he laughed, "my sister is always sticking her nose into things."



It didn't work. Jones was too good at throwing the other fellow off-base, and he was going to keep playing his own game. So he shot out another surprise question. "Are you broke?"

Of course this embarrassed Roy. But he wasn't going to let a little needling throw him off track. He wanted a man, and this nice looking, self-assured fellow was the only possibility in sight. Persistence might break him down. His first impulse was to say, Why no, he wasn't. But he checked himself. Five dollars and thirty-five cents was going to have to last until August.

"Uh, yes. Sort of," he said.

"Looks to me like you could chip in a nickle for your ride down town. That's half what you'd have to pay the bus man here."

Things were not going well. Could Jones really be such a tight-wad as all that? Of course he might be kidding him. Getting him flustered might be his way of getting acquainted. Roy decided to keep on smiling. "Well, maybe. I don't know," he said evasively.

Zilla interrupted with a sharp call from the kitchen window. She wanted Uncle Leon to hurry up, and she wanted him to come in and help her hunt.

Slowly, Jones turned toward his little house. He thumped the barrels. He picked up a washer, looked at it, rubbed off some dirt and stuck it in his hip pocket, this in spite of the fact he was dressed up in a blue serge suit for his doctor's visit. Surely he was as hot and uncomfortable as his niece

seemed to be in her pink silk, but Leon was far more calm about it. Unperturbed he walked toward his two-room house and entered.

Roy, shifting from one foot to the other, watched him to the last. How had the meeting gone? Grover was afraid he had been too obvious. And what if he were ahold of the wrong man? All fifty year old bachelors weren't homosexual, and he must admit Jones didn't look the type.

But you never knew. Jones's coolness could be a pose, and the fact that he had taken time to ask the new boy a couple of questions might mean he was interested. Could Roy have handled things better? Should he have matched coolness with equal reserve? Anyway it was only the first meeting. If he was going to catch the bus here every morning there would be plenty of time to work on the situation.

Suddenly, his plans to hit the road like a bum seemed rashly foolish. Nothing but a mad spell could have made him think of such a wild scheme. He was not the type to survive a rough and tumble life. The thing to do was control his anger. If his sister goaded him he must find a way to let it fly on by as calmly as Jones handled things. Why, a summer in little old River Terrace could have possibilities. No, this meeting with Leon had not been a waste of time.

"I wonder if you would give me a hand just a little bit?"

With an effort Roy pulled himself out of his reverie. Someone was talking to him.

"I need to get you to hold this frame while I screw it on. Some peach hauler pulled too close to me and busted the clamp all to hell. He damn near lost a bushel basket of peaches.

He sailed on by without stopping. I can't get this nut to hang over this here washer unless somebody holds this bent part up. I'll have to pay for a new frame if I don't get it to hold together pretty good by myself."

Roy turned. The bus driver, now standing only a few yards off, had set his pop bottle on a rock under the locust tree. He had pushed his visored cap far back on his forehead and was scratching his sweaty scalp with one index finger. With the other hand he held a screw driver. He had rolled up his shirt sleeves, taken his official tie off and draped it over the open door of the bus, and he had unfastened the three top buttons of his shirt. The bent mirror frame dangled down behind him. It now hung on to the door by only the tip end of one screw, and you could see someone was going to have to put plenty of pressure on it if it ever again stood up-right and accomodated three more screws.

First, Roy noticed the scalp the driver was scratching was practically bald. Only three or four fuzzy hairs still struggled to stay in place at a little point where the hair-line should have begun.

Next he noticed the bus driver had the clearest blue eyes he had ever seen, and, good heavens, when he smiled he had dimples. He was smiling now. A good guess would set his age at thirty, certainly much more juvenile than Jones was, and he was tall. Perhaps six-feet-two. But his slender, athletic frame might make him look an inch or two taller than he really was. A small trickle of sweat rolled down his chest to spread out in a little patch of blonde hair.

"What did you say?" said Roy.

The driver said, "It's hot, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Roy. "Yes. I'll bet it goes over ninety today." Then he quickly added, "But I don't mind hot weather, do you?"

"Not much. You must be new here," said the driver. What had Zilla called him? Did she say, Larry? "I haven't seen you catching the bus before," he went on. "Have you got to get down town or something? I think the people in River Terrace are nice, friendly folks. I like to help them out if it doesn't shake me up any. Are you broke or something?"

Without any doubt this was the handsomest man Roy had ever seen. Why hadn't he noticed it as soon as the bus drove in? His head was in some sort of whirl, and he wasn't thinking rationally at all. And if ever he needed to come up with a nice, sensible, snappy answer it was now. Probably he was standing there fidgeting. But if he was he didn't have the will-power to stop it. He realized he was answering Larry's question with a stammer, and he couldn't stop that either. The best he could do was leave his jaw hanging open.

Over in the little house he could hear Zilla and Leon heating up into some sort of row. Only a few of their words were distinguishable, but you could catch snatches such as "Just like a woman--" and "--never ready on time--" It sounded like they were in the habit of having a set-to every so often.

While that racket was cluttering up his thinking he realized he, himself, was making discordant noises. He was pouring out foolish words in a stream. There was no reason at all for him to tell the whole story of his five dollars and thirty-five cents, but he was. It would get him no where to tell

about his bossy sister, but he was doing that too. And who cared if he had just come from Oklahoma, but, of all things, he was boring this handsome man with such silly details.

"If you could just help me fix this frame we could get rolling back down town," said the driver.

As Roy rushed over to hold on to the twisted fixture the significance of the driver's last remark sunk in. He was offering to let him ride for nothing. Certainly he should be protesting that charity wasn't at all necessary. But all he could think of was how close he now was to this fellow, and before they got this contraption back in place they would probably be touching each other several times.

"Be careful you don't run into a little sliver of glass and cut yourself," said Larry. "The mirror part busted out when the truck clipped me, but a little hunk might still be stuck around some where."

Then he reached over, took Roy's hand and placed it in a safer position. At last he was applying the screw-driver to the screw. It didn't fit right off, and the bus man had to move around to get a better go at it. This left him brushing shoulders with the kid. The screw went in, the frame now stood upright, even if at a crazy angle.

Larry said, "We got that much, didn't we? Would you like a soda pop before we tackle the top?"

"Soda pop?" said Roy. "But the filling station man has locked the pop up, hasn't he?"

Larry pushed his cap far back on his head and ran his hand over the fuzz of his scalp. "It looks like he has, doesn't it?"

"What'll we do?" said Roy.

"Do?" said the bus driver.

Roy blushed, and quickly said, "We could put in the two top screws and maybe he would be through with his argument by then."

"Well, I guess we could," said the driver. Impulsively he picked up a wrench and set to work again. The top portion of the frame proved to be even springier than the bottom. Finally it became apparent that there was only one way the two men could fit it into place, that was for the taller Larry to stand close behind the kid and stretch both arms over Grover's shoulders. That way they could shove together. In a few shoves they had everything in place. Except for the fact that it was glassless you would hardly know the frame had been hit.

Over in the little house the row seemed to be slowly dying down.

"They'll be coming out in a minute," said Larry.

"I suppose they will," said Roy.

"Are you going to ride with old Leon?" Again the driver was pressing about which means of transportation the boy might use.

"Well, I don't know."

All at once Larry said, "There isn't anything with old Jonsey. You'd better forget him."

"Oh," said Grover.

Two scissor-tailed fly-catchers were playing around in the locust tree. A car, with some kid driving it, dangerously screeched off the asphalt part of the highway and kicked up gravel for a hundred yards as it passed the station. The bus driver picked up a pebble and holding it between his thumb and

index finger flipped it toward the empty pop bottle about fifteen feet away. It hit the top lip and caused the bottle to c reen around but not quite fall off the rock.

The lull in the conversation was awkward. Roy felt he must say something, so he said, "I'd rather ride with you."

The bus driver didn't keep the conversation moving right off. Instead he picked up another pebble and flipped it toward the bottle. Then he said, "I still got a few minutes before it's time for me to start the down town end of my run. We could go inside the bus and scrootch down on the back seat. No one would see us. Old Jonesey will just drive off and leave you if he comes ouf of his house and doesn't see you standing around. Then you could ride to town with me."

Roy at once entered the bus. And it was true that while he and the driver were scrootched down on the back seat Jones and Zilla came out and looked briefly around for him.

"Where in tarnation is that kid you were so hot to do favors for?" said Leon.

"How would I know," said Zilla. "His whole family's nutty, anyway. Let's go." They got into a five year old Flymouth that was standing on the other side of the station and drove off.

Time went by, several minutes in fact. Even though Zilla and Leon had left you still didn't see any signs of human occupation in the back part of the bus. No driver's smoke break could stretch out as long as this. It looked like Larry was going to be late for his run. The scissor-tailed fly-catchers still went at it up in the tree, adding twig upon twig to their next. Finally the driver rose up from the back seat,



stuffed his shirt-tail in his trousers, brushed at what was left of his hair, stretched his arms, patted something on the seat, and said, "Well, I guess I'd better get this thing rolling down town."

A few moments later, as the bus pulled out of the parking area you could see Roy rise up from the back seat and gaze contentedly toward the front of the bus. Within a couple of blocks the driver picked up his first passenger, an old woman who muttered about all the buses being so late. A few more blocks and a few more old ladies got on. Most of them seemed to be regular fares, and they began talking familiarly with the driver. He was polite and kept a good line of patter going, and when he smiled with his dimples they loved it.

Forty minutes or so later and with the bus filled to standing room they began making the down town stops. Roy would love to have got off the bus by going out the front door and at least exchanging glances with the driver. In fact, for the past thirty minutes he had been trying to catch Larry's eye by keeping a steady gaze fastened on the rear-view mirror above the windshield. But it seems Larry rarely had occasion to glance up at this mirror, and when he did he examined all parts of the bus except the back seat area.

The further they went down town the more people got jammed into the aisle. It was all but impossible to get up to the front door, and Roy saw he was already passed the street where Blanche had told him he could walk over to the employment bureau. He was also late. Instead of being there at nine o'clock when the doors opened, he would not reach Mrs. Carnes's office before ten. So he was going to have to hop out the back door

of the bus without exchanging a good-bye glance with the second, and most passionate, lover in his life.

He told himself bravely it didn't matter. He had already figured out the timing. It was about eight o'clock when Larry drove into Jones's station coming from town. Allow an hour each way to make the run. So Larry had left the down town area at seven o'clock. Was seven o'clock when bus drivers started to work? No, the chances were their day started at six, and it probably started at some out-lying area so on their first run they could carry early fares into the city region. There was a good chance Larry's day began right there in the parking area behind Jones's station. It probably started at six. Six was the time Roy would have to catch the bus into town so he could transfer to the line that went out to Lake Boomer. He would probably be riding to work every morning with his new lover.

Yes, this man was already, in his mind's eye, the new lover. Yes, he told himself he was keeping his head, and if things didn't work out he could easily forget the man. But the picture of his smiling face, and the way they seemed to get along so well together stuck in his mind. He had a new lover.

The new sights in Fort Boomer's business district were wonderful. The crowds on the sidewalk, the faster pace, the big buildings with all those things for sale in the show windows were fascinations that he wished he had time to drink in more slowly. Imagine, only this morning he had resolved to leave it all because he had allowed Blanche to get his goat. He wouldn't allow it again. As he passed through the doors of the employ-

ment bureau he told himself he was facing the best summer of his life.

Roy could tell he was approaching something unusual a couple of blocks before he got to the bureau. On either side of the street he could see men in work clothes milling around. He was now away from the rows of fashionable shops and into a district of run-down buildings filled with second-hand furniture stores, wholesale firms and an occasional hole-in-the-wall cafe. A pair of policemen stood off in the distance, but they didn't seem to mind if lone men leaned against the brick walls. The authorities were being lax to accomodate this unusual situation.

On all sides men were clustered in little groups, most often with a brash type in the center who was telling the latest work gossip, or the latest dirty joke. Roy heard an excited voice say, "Forty-five cents an hour". He heard the name, "Roosevelt" mentioned several times. Most often the "Roos" syllable rhymed with "blew". There was a bit about, "--good old Uncle Sam pays best. You ain't gonna git money like that just for diggin' ditches nowheres else."

He also heard the word for fornication several times. One fellow said, "I tell ya I ain't gonna work if I got the clap." A man with a red stubble of beard yelled out to whoever wanted to listen, "Don't fuck around with them cunts inside the office. Pick you out a straw-boss here on the street. They're comin' by all the time."

At that very moment a truck with an enclosed bed built up like a big silver cage stopped at the curb. Even before the burly driver got out of the cab a swarm of men flocked around

the truck door. Some men didn't even wait for the driver to give them a nod of the head which meant they were hired. They just piled into the big silver bed.

Other men paid no attention to this stray employer, whoever he might be. They leaned back against lamp posts and said, "Shit", or "Sucker". Mixed in with these comments of superior knowledge about the work situation Roy heard the words, "Heinie," and, "It ain't army. It's Air Force". A loud voice rose above the hub-bub saying, "They're here, I tell you. Right inside Fort Boomer. Some good-lookin' blonde whore might be a German spy." Grover picked up a faint echo to this statement, something about, "We'll never get into it."

It was very hard to tell what the employment office, itself, had once been. To Roy it suggested a gymnasium without bleacher seats. More likely it used to be a warehouse, or perhaps a World War I Armory. Any way, the city of Fort Boomer had risen to the challenge of a host of defense workers descending on the town by converting one of its largest, unobstructed floor spaces into an employment hall.

The inside was cavernous. Some sort of sky-lighting system let green light filter down on long lines of motley dressed men. At the head of the lines a segmented counter arrangement with numbered windows separated the work-assignment area from the waiting area. Far off on the back wall garlands of red, white and blue bunting framed twin pictures of Roosevelt and Henry Wallace.

Against one side-wall stood a series of portable blackboards where clerks were constantly erasing or chalking in job classifications. It seemed a clerk hardly had time to finish

writing out a job title before a swarm of the more eager men guessed what it was and rushed off to stand in a certain line.

It took Roy a few moments to look the situation over. The building, the crowds were so much bigger than anything he had expected. How would he find Velma Carnes in this mob? And if he did spot her how could he make sure he got in the line that led to her window? Obviously the first thing to do was keep an eye on those blackboards. But when he got over close enough to read them he saw the words, "Surveyor's helper" being erased. His heart skipped a beat. Was he too late?

Over on the opposite wall a door leading to a side street opened. A big man came in and bawled out, "Plumbing Crew. Everybody that's got a signed hiring slip. I ain't takin' no wild-catters. Plumbing crew. Bus loading for the Plumbing Crew."

More gossip floated by Roy's ears--"Government man. He don't pay no more than a sub-contractor. Might as well wait out on the street and catch one of them." But near the blackboards he heard two clerks talking about the same matter. "We've got to stop that street hiring. You don't know what slips through out there."

Just then someone tapped him on the shoulder. Grover turned to see an older man with a little scab on his cheek where he had cut himself shaving. "Have you got a match?" he said.

No, Roy didn't smoke. "If you ain't having any luck," said the man who seemed to be a compulsive talker and had a wild glint in his eye, "you ought to go out on the street. Lot's of fellows have got little things on their records, little

ticky-ended stuff that don't amount to a thing. Still that keeps you shut out. Me, I used to be a crew foreman in the CCC camps. I was the best man they had for three years. I got to drinkin' a little too much. Do you drink?"

Roy told the man, no, and immediately started to move away. But it wasn't that easy to shake him off. The fellow tailed after him. He must have been about the same age as Leon Jones.

"I didn't think you did," he said. "You look like an office type. Like you ought to be sittin' in some desk somewhere. It ain't any of my business, but if you want a time-keeping job you might pick up a sub-contractor out on the street. Lots of fellows have got little things on their records. Now me, I got it on my record that I drink. Just once I hit it too hard. I ain't touched a drop in eight months, but it's on my record. They've done told me up in that line that they won't hire me. Did you just hit town?"

Roy lied. No, he had not just hit town. The man didn't seem to detect the lie. He was too interested in talking. Had Roy been in the CCC camps? "The last one I was in a kid went plum beserk. He was a little younger than you look. He got a gun some place and holed up in his tent and wouldn't let no one come near him. They called the dicks from out of town twenty miles away. It was four hours before they talked him into comin' out--"

Roy was getting the fidgets. For some reason he kept wondering if this old coot was homosexual. Why did he think of that? He didn't need a lover now, and this one was too repulsive anyway. Deliberately he broke away from him and got in the end of the line that said, "Information".

At least he tried to get at the end of it. Two young toughs zeroed in on the line about the same time he did. They looked a year or two younger than Roy and acted as though they had been bumming around since they were thirteen or fourteen. The skinniest one wanted to get nasty. "I'm ahead of you, Ass-hole," he said to Roy. The fatter one gave Grover a shove.

Tough kids. Everyone turned to see if a fight was about to break out. The skinny kid could easily have been a grown-up version of the little devil who gave Roy his first beating back in Grass Prairie. But now, Grover prided himself in knowing how to avoid these challenges. You changed the subject, talked about girls or automobiles, anything to throw them off their purpose. But why had they picked on him? For an instant Roy thought of the bus driver and the back of the bus.

It seemed like an hour before he worked his way to the head of the line and got his chance with the poker-faced clerk wearing a green eye shade. Mechanically the clerk pointed out the rudiments of answering government forms and cautioned him to list all past employment correctly and completely. Routinely he asked Roy his name. It was for the purpose of directing him to the right line once his form was filled out. When he heard the name, "Grover", he said, "Oh", looked over one shoulder then the other, tilted back on his stool as though this was a break in his work that he had been looking for, placed both hands flat on his legs and with his right middle finger scratched his pants. "Well, I guess you want to go straight to Mrs. Carnes's office," he said. "It's that big door under the flag. You're late, aren't you?"

There were rows of desks between the counter and the door under the flag. However, ordinary interviewers sat at these. Not only was Mrs. Carnes's office distinguished by being behind a closed door, but she had a special waiting room with a personal secretary. Roy remembered the loud-mouth out on the street who had advised the world not to mess with the "cunts" inside. He could only have been talking about Velma or her secretary, because they were the only women in this whole, huge, improvised bureau. The loud-mouth was also unfair. These two women, amongst the first to invade the man's world, were quite attractive.

The secretary was pushing forty-five, and the first thing you noticed were her brown, naturally long eyelashes. Yet, they made her seem motherly rather than seductive. You suspected she went home evenings to an appreciative husband and several children. She took your application calmly, and when it was your turn to see the boss she called out your name in a pleasantly low voice.

Velma Carnes was much younger, ~~all little plump~~, but quite attractive. The name plate on her desk had a silver-colored background with black letters. Everything about her and her office was dignified. If you had qualms about the person in charge being a woman she managed to dispell them and still keep her femininity. She walked with a special carriage and sat in her chair with an elegant pose. As she spoke she tilted her chin slightly. In a soft voice she said, "How are you?" just like a Southern lady in a columned mansion. "I'm Mrs. Carnes, and you are--let's see. Why you are Roy Grover." A



slight shadow crossed her face. "You're late, aren't you?"

Two lines formed between her eyes. Her calm seemed to vanish, and she fluttered nervously with a stack of papers on her desk. As she looked around for an unknown document she asked how it was that Roy got to be late. "I thought it was all arranged for you to ride with Mrs. Melton and her uncle? How did you miss them?"

As Roy came out with evasive answers the lines deepened between her eyes. Evasion would not work with her. In rapid fire she shot out a series of detailed questions. When had Roy left the Skirvin home? How long did it take him to get to Jones's station? When he got there had Mr. Jones locked up yet? Where was Mrs. Melton the last time Roy saw her?

Grover's improvised answers omitted any reference to the bus driver. He claimed he went to a water hydrant in the back yard to get a drink and they drove off and left him. He could not tell specifically where the hydrant was located. The more he tripped himself up the more Velma picked at his discrepancies. You would think she had nothing to do all morning but cross-question him. She reduced Roy to mumbling and blushing.

Finally Mrs. Carnes leaned back in her swivel chair and draped one arm loosely toward the floor. "Do you realize how hard jobs are to find? Do you know that half or more of the men out in the waiting room have come hundreds, maybe thousands of miles, for a chance to work on the Fort Boomer air installations? How old are you, Roy? You are nearly seventeen. A nearly grown man like you childishly divedled around with a water hydrant and missed a chance at employment. How are you going to tell your sister that the job we saved for you was

gone when you finally showed up.

There was nothing lady-like nor elegant about the way she blew out her breath in disgust. Roy's apologies only caused her to re-open the questioning about the Melton ride. She wound up the inquisition by saying, "If you weren't related to your sister I'd say you made up this whole story. Well, we will see what we can find."

By making him fill out another form, and by making him wait another hour at one of the general interviewing desks she did manage to place him in another opening. She reminded him how lucky he was that one turned up unexpectedly, even one that paid three cents an hour less than a surveyor's helper. Needless to say, it would also be much duller and hotter than the job he had let go by.

At mid-afternoon they put him on a shuttle-bus and sent him out to the emerging air base for his interview with his future boss. Roy had not eaten since his pre-sunrise breakfast, and the thermometer hanging under the eaves of the kiosk where the shuttle-bus dropped him off registered ninety-eight degrees.

The air was filled with a white haze formed from dust suspended in the air. Grading was going on everywhere. As he stepped off the bus he noticed the only remaining tree in the area topple over in front of a bull-dozers blade. It must have been a part of a row of elms in front of someone's farm yard. The little white farm house was still there, but all the partitions inside were taken out, and it was re-vamped into a photographer's quarters. Here Roy got his badge and

had his identification photograph taken.

A little way off was a tiny corrugated tin shack. In front of it groaned an endless line of dual-wheeled trucks either loaded with gravel or returning empty-bedded. Inside this sweat box, with its two small windows taken out and leaning against the back wall, sat Roy's future boss. He was a slender man nearing sixty. The thumb and first three fingers were missing on his right hand. Leading from under his shirt cuff was a specially devised hook that he could work with the movements of the muscle of his arm. When he opened the hook and closed in with his little finger he could pick up a pencil and write a fairly legible hand.

As he talked with Roy he constantly looked off at the horizon. His soft voice was almost a whisper.

"You see these here trucks coming from the gravel pit down on the lake. You've got to get a chit from every one when they show up with a load and give out a receipt when they go back empty. The government trucks have got blue stickers on the windshield. You give them blue chits. You put them chits on the top row of pegs." He went on to explain the color of chit and receipt for each sub-contractor and where they must be kept. If he fouled up the shit would hit the electric fan. It meant somebody wouldn't get paid. He told Roy he looked like a sensible young man and hoped he turned out to be reliable. He would see him at seven o'clock in the morning.

Just as Roy turned to leave he called him back and said, "You look sort of lean. Ain't you eaten any lunch?" When Roy told him, no, he said, "I've been having trouble with my stomach. The wife made a sandwich for my sack lunch, but I didn't touch

it. You'll find it over there in that paper sack. I think she stuck in a couple of plums too. You can eat it all. It'll sour if you don't."

As Roy gratefully ate the hot fruit and wilted sandwich his boss bel tedly introduced himself. He said his name was Follard Gates, but everyone called him Pearly Gates. He looked off in the distance for a minute, then turned to ask Roy if he was living with his family, meaning his mother and father. When he found out Grover was staying with his sister and brother-in-law he said that was better than being left out on your own. Again he offered no explanation for his thoughts, but in a minute asked what Roy's brother-in-law did for a living. He did not seem impressed to learn he was an engineer. This old man ought to give you the creeps, but he didn't. Roy sort of liked him. He ought to be nicer than the husband of Velma Carnes. This summer might not be so bad.

A gravel truck drove in. Pearly Gates slowly rose and went out to collect a chit. He and the driver were chatting when the employment bureau shuttle-bus came by to pick Roy up. The only hurdle now left was telling Cliff he hired on as a chit taker.

But that night Grover did not face as big a talking to as he expected. The Skirvins were facing more important problems.

When Roy, hot and sunburned, walked through the front door he found Cliff already home, seated at the drop-leaf table, and a telegram in his hand. Blanche was standing behind him reading it over his shoulder. From the thoughtful expressions on their faces this must have been their second or third time to go over it. Cliff was still dressed in khakis, his pith helmet pushed far back on his forehead.

The telegram was from his Reserve Officer's unit. In a week he and his whole company were being called up for physical examinations, and those who passed would be put on active duty. The telegram

was tersely worded in official language, and although they were going over it letter by letter they could milk out no more information than that.

"Well," said Cliff, "All the boys have been hearing rumors like this for a long time. Well, when we were back in college and signed up for reserve duty we know this could happen. Well, maybe we'll get sent to a camp that has decent quarters, some that are fit for a wife too. Maybe we won't have to pull up everything here in River Terrace right off. It's best Blanche stays on for awhile until they get me settled. Well, a year in the actives will be good experience. And the law says they have to give our jobs back when we get out. And those fresh draftees coming in need guidance."

"Yes," said Blanche, "I know the men in your outfit will set good examples for them. A year isn't long. Yes, we'll have to learn to adjust. We'll manage with our house and furniture somehow. Life is full of surprises. It's not like we were thrown out of work or cut-off without anything to eat. They say those new Army camps are fixed up plenty nice for the men and their wives too. If our husbands can take it we wives can too."

However, all their rationalizing to reduce the call-up to a small matter did not prevent each of them from re-reading the notice several more times. And before he took time to pull off his work clothes Cliff telephoned several men living in the city who were also in his company to see if they had gotten the same notice. All of them had. Skirvin asked each one what he intended to do about breaking up their household and moving and got various answers. To each one he commented it was probably a good thing after all.

Art Carnes was one of the men in the company, and Cliff talked to him a long time. They joked that they would no longer have to cut each other's hair. Enlisted barbers would do it for nothing. They wondered how far away from home they would be sent. Would they only get to San Antonio or El Paso, or would they be sent completely out of the state? Carnes had heard of an outfit over in Dallas getting sent all the way up to Wisconsin. You could tell the two men were torn between the lure of distant travel and the uncertainty of breaking up their homes.

Cliff's conversation with Carnes drew out so long Grover was afraid it would get around to his own foul-up this morning. Velma Carnes must be home by now. The chances were, if this call-up didn't throw her off track, she would spill the story of that little whipper-snapper losing out on a good thing as soon as she laid down her purse.

But none of Cliff's telephone responses sounded like he was hearing that report. Finally, he glanced at their eight-day clock on the shelf and said, "I've got to hang up." When the receiver was on the hook he wet his lips and said, "Well. Well, the chores have to be done." He went to the bathroom to get out of his work clothes and into a hot shower.

As soon as Skirvin was off the phone Blanche got on it and contacted the wives whose husbands Cliff had just talked to. She dropped many more stock phrases about looking on the bright side of it. It would be an exciting experience if they wanted to make it one. She speculated about petty annoyances an army wife would have to put up with, but she was sure she could find worthwhile projects. So many people would be needing guidance.

Her last call was to Velma. She had gotten home just as Cliff was phoning Art. She had only half heard the news.

She and Art had not yet decided if they would close up their home here in River Terrace. Blanche said she and Cliff had not decided either. At last she hung up and turned to Roy and said, "Good heavens, I've forgotten to start supper. Roy, how did your day go?"

Roy had gotten a job, but not the good one. He told Blanche much the same story he had made up for Velma except he amplified the part about hunting up a water hydrant. He claimed Lilla and Leon were having an awful row inside, one that went on forever. So he had figured he might as well hunt up some drinking water and cool off. How was he to know they would pick that moment to cut off arguing and leave.

Blanche became slightly disgusted. Angrily, she tapped a table spoon on the side of a stew pan and mumbled something about the butter they were buying from a neighbor tasting sour. Creamery butter was safer. Then she said, "So, what finally happened?"

She continued getting cooking vessels arranged correctly as she listened to the rest of her brother's story. Well, was he really hired? And had he thought to mail the four letters he wrote last night? Yes, Roy had bought stamps and mailed them. Did he have any money left? About five dollars and ten cents. She called toward the bathroom and asked Cliff if he had heard of a man named Folly Gates. No, Cliff had not.

"It's not as good as starting out with someone like Mr. Carnes," she said impatiently. Then she lowered her voice and said, "I'm worried about Cliff's stomach. We never told you and Mama, but he sometimes gets terrible indigestion spells. All of a sudden he will start throwing up, and it's almost impossible to get the vomiting stopped. Last April when

he had his last spell we had to take him to the hospital. It was two days before they could keep anything on his stomach. Cliff is so fussy about the food he eats. I'm afraid he'll never be able to stand Army cooking. I've tried to get him to tell this to the Army doctors. He just blows up in the air. He says only draft-dodgers report to medics. He might have a spell anytime."

Cliff had a spell that night. It came on immediately after supper. As soon as he broke away from the flurry of telephoning he rushed to cram in his evening chores. Thrown off schedule he worked at fever pitch. The cosmos would wilt if they didn't get their full amount of water. A nasty batch of Bermuda grass in the back lawn would invade his vegetable garden if the edges weren't spaded off at once. Mulch should be spread on his row of onion slips, and the beets should be thinned. Also, Roy must be broken in to take over doing the chores.

But, of course, training Roy took time. The kid didn't soak the cosmos correctly, and the necessarily detailed instructions to set him right ate into the swollen schedule.

When the gardening was finished, all too slap-dash, Cliff reminded Roy they must tackle another problem. If Cliff were leaving they could no longer put off Roy's learning to drive. With only a week left to teach him they would have to wedge in a lesson tonight. A mere fifteen minutes would be better than nothing.

Roy was secretly elated. At last he had someone to teach him to drive.

The fifteen minute, squeezed-in lesson meant Cliff had to omit doing his share of fixing the supper. Today he had planned to cream a mess of squashes, but it looked as though he would find only the time to pick a few, clip their ends and leave them in a



pan on the back doorstep.

Cliff had to telescope the driving lesson slightly as well. He had planned to spend some time showing his brother-in-law how the parts of an automobile actually operated, but he had to limit himself to lifting up the hood, pointing out where the choke attached itself to the carburator, where the battery cable was connected and where you could turn the plug that would drain the radiator. Then he had Roy start the motor, drive a few feet both forward and backward. When he could work the gears smoothly he had him back down the ribbons, turn out in the street and circle the block twice.

Fifteen minutes had passed when they again had the car over the pit in front of the garage. Cliff was telling his pupil he had not done badly when Roy accidentally brushed against the horn. The horn sounded and stuck in the sound position. It would not jiggle loose. No doubt it was disturbing neighbors, who were about to sit down for their suppers, for blocks around.

While Cliff scurried to get out and get the hood up he named the type of pliers Roy should get off the rack on the double garage doors. Roy did not get the right ones, but a pair designed for cutting wire. Cliff pinched on the horn wire connection and got shocked. The horn kept on blaring. Cliff must run over to the tool rack and get the right ones himself and unscrew the main battery cable. The horn finally stopped.

At this point, Planche, careful not to upset the pan of unused squashes on the back doorstep, called out that supper was ready. But Cliff could not so easily tear himself away from the stuck horn problem. He must re-connect the cable to

see if it would start again. It did not. The sensible thing to do was go eat supper, think it over, and if some adjustment could be done, do it later. How else could he save his badly eroded schedule? But Skirvin spent several more minutes fiddling with wires before he gave up trying to find out why the horn had stuck in the first place.

Nor could he completely forget the yellow-crook-necked squashes on the doorstep. He picked them up, carried them inside, and before he could join the others at the table he had to wash them off and put them in a special plastic box in the refrigerator. Blanche petulantly reminded him he was taking too much time with something she had already foreseen. A half hour ago she saw he would not be able to cram in a driving lesson and fix his share of the supper too, so she had opened a jar of tomatoes and stewed them with macaroni.

She also thought Cliff looked a bit pale. "Do you feel alright?" she asked. He said, certainly he did, but why had she fixed macaroni and tomatoes? She knew they gave him gas. Blanche said she was sorry, but it had been a long time since they had tried them, and what else would they do with their supply of canned tomatoes?

Blanche had further sped things up by setting a wash pan of warm water on the back porch for Roy to use and by putting a clean towel out in the bathroom for Cliff. That way the two men could be presentable at the table a few moments earlier. When Roy was through washing his face he tossed the water out the back door country style. Blanche told him it wasn't the thing to do here. He should pour it down the kitchen sink. He had also let a bee get in the house.

Bee? Cliff came out of the bathroom. They must chase it out at once. Skirvin had a running grudge with his neighbor three doors down because he kept bees in so populous a place as River Terrace. He couldn't stand the thought of one being in his house. So the three joined forces and chased the insect out.

As they sat down at the table to say grace the rays of the setting sun lit up the window panes with golden colors. The meal seemed quite good in spite of the fact that Cliff had not taken a hand in it. Besides the tomatoes there were carrots, okra and meat loaf. Cliff asked if Blanche had put any sage in the meat loaf. No she had not.

"Any red pepper?"

"No," she said. "You know I never touch that can of red pepper. We should throw it away if we can't eat it."

Skirvin grunted his disapproval of throwing things away. In spite of the appetizing food and the glorious sunset the table conversation did not get out of the doldrums. Roy, for example, made the mistake of mentioning that his boss-to-be, Mr. Gates, had been sick with stomach trouble when he was interviewed for his job. This caused Blanche to bring up rumors she had heard about an indigestion bug going around the neighborhood. In the middle of the afternoon one of her typing pupils had called up to say she couldn't keep anything on her stomach and would have to miss tonight's class. Cliff, himself, had heard something similar. Somehow Carnes had gotten a report on Leon Jones's visit to the doctor that morning. The medics weren't convinced it was heart trouble. Leon might have nothing worse than a stomach bug. They were keeping him in

the hospital for observation.

The conversation switched to the slightly more pleasant topic of Leon Jones. There was no telling what an old man who lived by himself like that ate. It was a wonder he looked so healthy.

How much money did Jones have? Blanche doubted he had very much. There just wasn't that much traffic going by on the highway. What was there further out in the country? Nothing but some farms and that little dried up town called Pristine. It's a wonder Jones had sold enough gas to keep himself in groceries.

Cliff didn't agree. He suspected Leon had plenty stashed away. "They say he came to this country thirty years ago with a blue shirt and a dollar bill, and he hasn't changed either one since." Old Jonsey could have two or three thousand dollars, maybe as much as five, stuffed in a mattress. He might have played the stock market and built up a bigger lode than that. The old boy could afford to spend a couple of days in the hospital. But he doubted if they would be able to keep him much longer than that.

From Jones the conversation switched to his neice, Lilla Melton. Neither of the Skirvins knew exactly what her background was. She had been divorced. But most agreed that in spite of her brassy appearance she was a "good woman". Someone had told Blanche that Lilla had a twelve year old daughter living with grandparents down in Comanche. Lilla was supposed to be renting a house out in Pristine, but for the last couple of weeks she had been staying with old Leon because he was feel-

ing under the weather.

Cliff laid down his fork and looked blankly toward the window framing the fading sunset. Small beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. No doubt about it, he was pale.

"I feel sick," he said.

Blanche also laid down her eating utensils. Two deep furrows formed between her eyes. Before calling in the men for supper she had changed into the nice dress she saved to wear to her typing class. It began at seven o'clock, so she would have to leave immediately after eating. She was now at the table, her hair and make-up carefully in place, dressed in a sensible, light-weight, navy-blue crepe and low-heeled shoes. It seemed she had been more efficient than Cliff to get herself so well in order and prepare the supper too. It was now only fifteen minutes to seven.

Rising from her chair she said, "I'll get a glass of warm water and some soda."

No, Cliff knew soda was not good for him.

"Then some iced-tea." But as soon as she had suggested this Blanche closed her eyes in despair. In her rush she had left off making iced-tee for supper. Quickly she set a kettle of water on the stove to prepare some. By experience she knew that if Cliff could not keep tea on his stomach then he was in for a very bad spell. As she hurried to get it ready Skirvin questioned her in closer detail about what she had put in each of tonight's dishes. She was sure she had not included anything that was known to make him have a spell. He must have picked up a bug.

But while she was explaining this Cliff had to make a run to the bathroom to throw up. Blanche dropped the tea project and followed him in. Taking a towel from the shelf she soaked it in cold water and washed off her husband's face just as soon as he could control himself. Calmly she urged him to sit still on the bathroom stool while she threw back his head and covered his face with the improvised cold compress. She called Roy in and had him throw open the bathroom window and drive out the odor as quickly as possible. Unpleasant smells made him worse. And if Roy would look in their bedroom closet he would find an electric fan. They could plug it in and air the place out that much quicker.

Roy rushed to the bedroom. Their closet was extremely small, not much more than two by four feet. To make room for their extra things the Kirvins had stacked the walls from floor to ceiling with carefully arranged boxes. And their suits, dresses and work clothes hung on a little rod stretched across the center. Where could the fan be? Roy began a quick but systematic search.

Blanche, still washing her husband's face with wet towels, said she was going to call the Army hospital. Now that he was to be inducted they ought to know. The very idea caused Cliff to start wrenching again. He wouldn't hear of it. He was even reluctant to have her call their regular civilian doctor. They should save their money. If this was a bug he would be cleared up by morning. But all the time he was having to interrupt his argument to vomit. Even when he was more or less under control his breathing came in hard gasps. It looked like he was in for a bad spell.

With Roy searching for the electric fan Blanche got her husband into the bedroom and turned back their bed's counterpane and sheet. It was a futile effort. Before Cliff could get undressed he had another attack of violent vomiting.

That cleared up any hesitation his wife might have had. She was going to call a doctor of some description. Money or no money, it looked like it would have to be the civilian one. Now was not the time to press her husband about the military. She hurried to the telephone, but all she could get was their regular doctor's wife who said someone else had just called her husband out on a house call. Some sort of stomach bug was keeping all the doctors busy. Cliff was now back in the bathroom bent over the tub. With the sound of his vomiting coming through the door Blanche tried to take down the home phone number of a substitute their doctor's wife was recommending. Just possibly this general practitioner might be able to go out to River Terrace.

In between heaves Cliff called out that he did not want a substitute. If he must have a physician he would wait until their regular one got home. Blanche, calmly talking, now to her husband and now to the telephone, tried to line up both possibilities. She left a message with the doctor's wife for him to call the Skirvins as soon as he got in, and she also took down the number of the substitute.

By the time she hung up Cliff had composed himself enough to get back to the bedroom. There he lay, stretched out short-wise on the bed, his head dangling backwards and downwards in hopes that uncomfortable position would stop the wrenching. Between teeth that were nearly clinched he urged Blanche to go to

her typing class. His wife said she wouldn't think of such a thing.

"Go on, go on," said Skirvin. "It's time you were there now. What'll your pupils think if you don't show up?"

By now Roy had found the fan, and Blanche, trying desperately to think of the best course of action, helped him set it up in front of the bathroom window so it would suck out some of the unpleasant fumes now filling the whole house.

Suddenly, she started crying. Her mind was set, she sobbed, she would not go to class. "What if you get worse? You'll have only one thing to do. Go to the hospital. Who's going to drive you there? You, yourself, can't get a car down the road doubled up in cramps."

"Roy can drive me there, and I'm not going to get bad," said her husband.

"Roy! Certainly not. I'm not going to have a kid with fifteen minutes' instruction taking you to the hospital. You'll both get killed. No, I'm staying here."

Cliff proved to be the firmer of the two. She must go to class. All he needed was a cup of warm tea. During his past spells that had usually settled his stomach. If she would make a cup of tea before all the water boiled away he could tell in a minute if he was going to keep it down. If he did she had better go to her class.

The tea was ready in a jiffy, and Cliff claimed it was staying down very well. The eight-day clock showed three minutes after seven. Blanche finally consented to go even though she would arrive late. She gathered up her briefcase, her hat and her purse and went out to start the Ford. Nervously,



she flooded it, and Cliff heard her grinding away on the starter. He told Roy to go out and tell her to floorboard the accelerator. Just then the motor caught and poured black smoke out the exhaust. The car shugged out the driveway, and Blanche was off.

The clock showed seven-fifteen, and wisps of the flooded engine's black smoke still drifted across the yard when Cliff had another vomiting spell. He upset his cup of tea and spilled the brown liquid on the bedroom rug rushing to get to the bathroom. This time he produced only convulsive dry heaves. Even though he had nothing left to bring up he seemed unable to stop them. For ten minutes he gagged and heaved.

Roy tried to get him to go back to bed. But Cliff, when he wasn't doubled up over the tub, preferred to stretch out flat on the bathroom floor, his arms spread at right angles to his body, his head lolling listlessly from one side to the other. Up on the window sill the small electric fan purred and sucked out a bit of the foul air.

Roy told Cliff he would listen to no objections. He was going to call the substitute doctor. Automatically Skirvin muttered objections, but it was clear that they now lacked conviction. His palid, sweaty skin indicated his whole system must be badly dehydrated. The set look in his eyes was frightening.

Blanche had thoughtfully left the substitute doctor's phone number in full view by the receiver. In a few seconds Grover was talking, not with a doctor, but again with a doctor's wife. She sounded jolly as well as sensible. She must have been speaking from a kitchen phone because Roy could hear

clattering dishes. Even further in the distance came the sound of a baby wailing.

She said her husband was out. Would he please describe all his brother-in-law's symptoms. Could he keep anything down? Not even tea? Had he been bothered with these spells before? How long had he been vomiting? Without stopping? How long would his wife be at her typing class? Until nine o'clock?

Then she said flatly, "You'd better get him to the hospital. Can you drive? Do you have a neighbor who drives?"

Roy could only answer that somehow he would get Cliff to the hospital. By the time he hung up Skirvin already had the solution figured out. Call Art Carnes. From his prone position on the floor he dictated the Carnes' phone number. He was sure his friend would be right over.

Roy dialed their number, and with the sound of Skirvin's gasps and heavy breathing coming from the bathroom he heard Mrs. Carnes' business-like voice answer.

She was confused as to just what he wanted. "Are you still talking about the reserve call-up? Then are you calling about the job? You mean you are calling about Cliff? What's the matter with Cliff? No, I can't hear any sounds from your bathroom."

Roy described in detail what had happened. They could get neither their regular doctor nor a substitute to make a house call. Blanche was teaching her typing class. Cliff was worse and needed to go to the hospital.

She said, "Have you thought of an ambulance?"

Roy knew better than to pass this suggestion on to Cliff. An ambulance was far too expensive. Apparently Mrs. Carnes also realized the extreme nature of her idea. Quickly, she

said, "I'm having guests tonight."

Roy firmed an idea he had suspected this morning. This woman was hard to get along with. Things would never go smoothly when you were dealing with her. How could he make her understand this was an emergency? Politely, he tried to explain. She too wanted to know if he could drive a car. When she learned he could not she thought a moment then said, "My husband is out batting flies."

Mrs. Carnes might be masterful and decisive when she was down at the employment office, but at home she was not the most lucid person in the world. Roy paused while he tried to untangle her statements. First, when she said, "I'm having guests," that meant her, personally, and not her husband. Next, when she said her husband was batting flies she must mean baseball flies, presumably outside on a nearby vacant lot. The fact that it was nearly dark and fly-batting must have been over several minutes ago indicated Mrs. Carnes was straining to find excuses.

She was also good at keeping him off-balance. Now she wanted to know why he didn't walk over to Blanche's school and get her out of class. It was only nine or ten blocks from his house. In the time he was taking to phone neighbors he could have been there. Abruptly, she broke off from solving his problems to say, "Uh. Just a minute. Art's coming in the door. Hold the line for a moment."

The next voice Roy heard was a deep, hearty, pleasant one. Art Carnes said, "Hello, Roy. It's good to talk to you. I've heard so much about you. How did you get on with old Gates?"

Roy got the mental picture of a man whose great enjoyment in life could easily be knocking flies for neighborhood children. It wasn't a mental picture that he liked. All muscle, no brains. Such a man might really have kept at the fly batting until dark.

Roy was prepared to explain in detail the extent of the emergency here at the Skirvin's, but only a sentence or two was necessary. Carnes interrupted and said, "I'll be right over." He would have hung up so he could get into action, but something must have detained him. Cutting short his goodbye he said, "Uh, just a minute though. My wife's got company." And he cupped his hand over the receiver. A few muffled sounds came through as he talked to someone in the room. When he took his hand away he said, "Roy, my boy, we'll be right over." We? "My wife's guests will have to ride to town with us, but we'll be right over. Tell Cliff not to worry."

Perhaps the knowledge that he would soon be transported to help calmed Skirvin somewhat. For a moment he breathed easier. He told Roy to straighten up the house a bit. It was such a mess for neighbors to run in on.

Grover was more concerned with getting Cliff, himself, cleaned up. Blanche had never succeeded in getting her husband's shirt and trousers off. Both were now entirely unpresentable. Roy selected clean garments from the bedroom closet, but just the effort of rising from the floor to put them on sent Skirvin into another seizure of vomiting, terrible dry heaves. The best Roy could do was get a wet cloth and wipe off the unsightly parts as much as possible.

Five minutes went by and Carnes had not showed up. Cliff

again lay exhausted on the bathroom floor. Ten minutes went by. Fifteen. It was now quite dark. A whippoorwill, probably perched in one of the oak trees left standing beside the river, began his peculiar call. Two children raced down the street on bicycles. Cliff went into another spasm which nullified any cleaning Roy had done to his clothing. While in the midst of the new heaving headlights turned into the driveway.

They came from a three year old Studebaker. A nice looking man was driving. Two people were in the back seat. The driver got out, and with a couple of athletic strides was inside the house.

"Hello, Roy. Good to know you. Where's the patient? Pew, I can smell him." The odor seemed to amuse Carnes more than it offended. "Pew, old man," he said when he got to Skirvin, "What in hell are you doing on the floor? Wait until Vinnie Dollop gets a whiff of you." Such was his way of handling a sickness.

Carnes wore dark colored dress trousers and a spotless white shirt. He would hardly have been batting flies in such sprucy clothes. For some reason he had taken time to change--the wife's influence? His well-groomed hair emitted an aroma of sweet peas strong enough to top the sick-room smell here in the Skirvin house. He must have also taken time to douse it with scented hair oil.

But once here he was not wasting a second. He had already scooped Cliff off the floor, and with one arm around his waist was walking him toward the door. Over his shoulder he instructed Roy to get a thick blanket to protect the back seat of his car.

Roy yanked a blanket out of the closet and was out at

the Studebaker by the time Art and his patient were there. One of the two people who had been in the back seat was still there, and as soon as Roy got a look at her Grover guessed who had caused most of the delay.

Sitting squarely in the middle, so solidly placed that you wondered how the other passenger had squeezed in beside her, was a sour-faced woman about fifty years old. Perhaps in her younger days she had been attractive, but the years had obliterated both beauty and grace. You got the impression she had gone a step further than not caring about her looks, she was deliberately flaunting untidiness. Her hair was a stringy gray, not done up in buns or knots as an over-worked farmer's wife might have fixed it, but cut short in an unstylish bob and left to flare as it will. The best Roy could see from a tiny overhead light in the car and from the twenty-five watt bulb in the Skirvin cupola the woman wore no make-up except for heavy, red lipstick overflowing the lines of her thin lips. Her dress was an expensive veil, but it did not look good. Her silk stockings had runners which showed up especially clear in the imperfect lighting, and on her broad feet she wore a type of Mexican leather sandals called guaraches. They were the kind that squeaked loudly when you walked.

Carnes was having trouble getting her out of the back seat. "Put him up in front," she was saying. "That seat's as soft as this one." When she caught sight of Roy and his blanket she demanded to know what that thing was for. "I'm not going to be smothered on a hot night like this." Stubbornly, she was trying to let on like she had no idea an emergency was possible, much less that she was in the presence of one.

Carnes was trying to get her to move with the technique of joking, and it seemed he like to think in terms of romance. "But Vinnie," he said, "you'll be sitting in the front seat beside me. The moon's coming up. I'll even let you scoot over close enough to whiff my skin bracer."

Then Roy caught a glimpse of the other person who had been in the back seat. He should have noticed him sooner because like the old woman, he was not in the least shy nor retiring. But in all other ways they were exact opposites.

She was crabby and gross. The boy--he must have been about Roy's age--floated around like a feather. The old woman seemed to be discarding youth as though it were an offensive burden, while the kid seemed to have suddenly found himself in adolescence before his child-like bones had had a chance to fill out.

There was only one word to describe him. He was a sissy. His overly stylish clothes indicated he would make no attempt to appear active and robust. His dark hair flowed in far longer and deeper waves than a self-respecting man would allow. It made the features of his face look small and his skin pale. He had dressed his thin frame in a pin-stripe sport shirt, designed for the tail to be left out. A neat monogram was embroidered on the pocket. His trousers were creased like folded paper and were made of a light ducking that suggested an expensive yacht, but not a rough and tumble sailor. You could barely see pale gray socks between the trouser cuffs and his clean white oxfords.

While the woman was blunt this young man was suave and correct. In fact it was his correctness which caused Roy to

notice him. He came from out of the darkness, stood at Grover's elbow and introduced himself. He was Malcolm Fox, and he finished off the introduction with a, "How-do-you-do". Then he remarked that it was unfortunate having sickness in the family during such nice, summer weather.

In the back seat Vinnie kept up a stream of pure balkiness. She couldn't understand why a man with a little stomach trouble had to have a whole backseat. "What's the matter with him? Vomit? Oh, Christ. Paw, I smell it. Art Carnes, did you expect to carry me home with a man who's puking all over everything? God, he smells like a cess pool."

The whiff inspired her to move. Like a crane slowly revolving into position she shoved both fists down on the seat and pushed herself up. Carnes kept up his patter. "--Think of the handsome internes you'll get a chance to flirt with down at the hospital, Vinnie."

Malcom Fox rushed to help her out the door. She did her best to fall on top of him. But the kid was more nimble than you would think. He managed to get her on the ground more or less up-right. However, she stomped her foot down on the one uneven clump of Bermuda grass in Skirvin's entire lawn and let her guareache slip sideways on it.

"Cripes. I've twisted my ankle," she said.

Roy rushed in to spread the blanket on the back seat. Fox and Carnes deftly fitted Skirvin in and closed the door. Now it only remained to get Vinnie installed in the crowded front. Her ankle, she insisted, was in terrible shape. But the fact that she would soon be at a hospital where the truth of her



condition could be verified got her off on to another tack. Why couldn't Malcolm catch the bus home? The terminal was supposed to be around here some where. Roy thought Mr. Carnes killed that suggestion a little too quickly. He muttered something about no buses for Malcolm. Then Vinnie wanted to know why Carnes hadn't bought a car that had a single cushion stretching across the whole front instead of two bucket seats. Three people could not sit there.

While this was going on the pale faced Malcolm was pushing up close to Roy and talking a blue streak. Roy had never heard anyone fly off into such a run-on talking jag. A small boy like Malcolm should be bashful, but Vinnie's nephew, or whatever he was, snuggled up to Roy like a month old puppy. "You speak with an accent? Are you new here? Ah, from Oklahoma? Really! Oh, yes, Gloriona. Fine place. No, I haven't been there, but I'm sure it's fine."

Roy didn't know what to think of him. The kid charmed and repelled at the same time. He might be another queer. Should he get friendly with him? A summer listening to him might be better than watering cosmos.

Vinnie Dollop was seated. But she spread herself so completely over the bucket seat it seemed impossible to fit her nephew in. However, Fox hopped like a little cricket into an impossibly thin place and closed the door. Cliff was finally off to the hospital.

The house seemed so quiet with no one else there. Work would dispell loneliness so Roy set about to clean up the place. Should he notify Blanche? Cliff's last instructions had been not to bother his wife. She should be allowed to finish her class before telling her her husband was packed off to the hospital. Noble and self-sacrificing, but did he really mean it? As soon as he got the place aired out he should walk over to that school and tell her.

He didn't get the chance. While he was wringing out the mop the headlights of the Ford swept into the driveway. In a second Blanche was out and asking, "Has he gone yet?"

Mrs. Barnes might not have thought Cliff's stomach was in such bad shape that he couldn't wait until her husband primped himself and she crawled her hand to move relatives in the emergency car, but the situation had sounded dramatic enough for her to call the school janitor and have him get Blanche out of class and to the phone.

When she learned her husband was on the way to the hospital Blanche complemented Roy on the wonderful job he had done. He had used common sense, and she was especially grateful that he had cleaned up the frightful mess here in the house. Then she sat down at the phone to contact the hospital. It took several minutes to get confirmation that a Clifford Skirvin had been admitted because the desk nurse had not yet received official notice that he was in. But Blanche kept the nurse on the line until she checked with emergency and found that he was there and being treated.

As she hung up the receiver she leaned back in the upholstered chair and took a deep breath. "Let me think," she said.

She let her thoughts come out in snatches of audible sentences, "--he's being taken care of--can't do anymore there--if I rush down there I'll just sit--let me think--"

Soon she said, "There's something better I can do. What time is it?" It was nearly eight o'clock. Taking a deep breath she said, "Roy, I've got to be sensible. In a week Cliff is

going to be stuck in the army. He'll be there at least a year. Now, Cliff keeps saying it's my lousy cooking that makes his stomach go haywire. He's got that idea so embedded in his brain that he's forced his way into the kitchen and prepares half the meals himself.

"I say my cooking isn't that bad. I think he's a sick man. Up to now the doctors haven't been able to find anything wrong with him, but that doesn't mean he isn't sick. Roy, you saw him yourself, groaning and moaning there on the floor. There's got to be something wrong with him."

Blanche went to the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of milk, took one sip of it and set the glass down. "He got sick once when he was on his yearly drill practice. Some army doctor told him he was playing off, and he's been ashamed to say anything to the medics ever since. He says they are right. If they can't find anything wrong with him he might as well be a soldier as anyone else. I don't care how silly it sounds I'm going to call up his company commander and tell him Cliff is sick again."

She took another sip of the milk and paced the kitchen floor some more. She moved into the living room and looked at the clock. "I'll sound like a hysterical housewife," she said. Then she rubbed the palms of her hands across her face and said, "I'll do it anyway."

She found the home telephone number of a Major Thomas Angerstein in a small red notebook Cliff kept in the upper drawer of his dresser. The Major lived down in San Antonio. It meant a long distance phone call which would probably last

longer than three minutes. Nevertheless, she propped the little red book open beside the telephone, and straining her eyes to get his number down right she asked the operator to make a person to person call to Major Angerstein.

No one answered. The operator kept ringing and ringing without any results at all. Forced to hang up Blanche plowed through the red notebook to find some more numbers. Here was a Captain she had heard Cliff speak about. He too lived in San Antonio, and she asked the operator to put through a person to person call.

Fortunately she got an answer within five rings. Blanche introduced herself as Mrs. Clifford Skirvin. Then she began explaining who that was. Her husband had been on maneuvers with him a year ago. Maneuvers. At least she thought that was the proper term for what he had been on--her husband was a reserve officer. A lieutenant.

Two minutes of her three minute call were spent in getting the Captain to remember who her husband was. Such a bad start would have daunted a lesser woman, but Blanche kept her voice as business like as possible. She explained she had not been able to reach Major Angerstein at his home. Would he know where the major might be found. Yes, it was something of an emergency. He gave her a number. Her call had lasted over four minutes.

Again she put through a person to person call. She whispered to Roy that some women had answered and she could hear sounds of loud music in the background. Then she broke off to say, "Hello, Major Angerstein?" Again she spent many precious seconds getting the man to remember who her husband

was. Once she cupped her hand over the receiver to whisper to Roy, "He might be drunk." Then she explained about her husband getting his call-up telegram today and by coincidence had become extremely ill and hospitalized this very same night. She wanted to be sure he knew about it, and what would be the best procedure for her to go through in case he did not get out of the hospital? Blanche wrote down several sentences. Something about a letter from the local doctor. Several times Blanche urged him to make a note that Lieutenant Clifford Skirvin was seriously ill. Her last words before she hung up were to repeat her husband's name and the fact he was extremely sick.

When she put down the receiver deep furrows had formed between her eyes. She walked into the kitchen and finished off her glass of milk. She thoroughly washed the glass in the sink, dried it and placed it back in the cabinet.

"What if they can't find anything wrong with him?" she said.

Then she shook her head as if ridding herself of something invisible and said, "I'll have to get moving. I'll put some things in a handbag and get down to the hospital."

"Roy, I hate for this to come up just when you are starting work. No one knows where we'll be a week from now, but it will all come out in the wash. If Cliff gets real bad I may have to stay down at the hospital all night. You know how to cook breakfast and make a sack lunch. Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time to get down to the bus stop--"

"Oh," she said, "I almost forgot to tell you something. The girls were talking about it in the typing class. You remember at supper I told you Leon Jones was not bad off. Well, he

was worse than they thought. The poor old man died suddenly in the hospital this afternoon. One of the nurses saw him sit up in bed, probably to get up and go to the bathroom, and he just flopped back on his pillow right there. He didn't make another motion nor take another breath. It's sad. He might have been grouchy but he served the neighborhood in his own way. Running a filling station may not be much, but gas and oil's something we've all got to have.

"The girls in the class were saying there's a loud rumor that there might be some trouble about the city buses stopping under the locust tree where they always do. I don't know what the fuss is about. It's something to do with Zilla Melton's sister and brother-in-law. They've found a will, and Leon left everything to Zilla. She wants to turn the filling station into a little cafe, and her relatives are moving in big to run things. Anyway, the city bus will have to stop somewhere even if that pack of in-laws won't let them stop at Leon's. You'd better allow yourself an extra ten minutes in the morning in case there's a mix-up."

After she had left Roy found that the word "mix-up" was sticking in his mind. What sort of mix-up could there be at the bus station? Would it have anything to do with Larry? Would he see the handsome driver at six o'clock in the morning? Were his calculations about the time the man would start to work completely wrong? Actually, all he knew was this morning the bus driver parked under the locust tree at eight and was scheduled to go back to the city at something like eight-thirty.

How could Leon's death have anything to do with city bus schedules? They don't change the time a bus runs, at least

not very often.

He must get to bed so he could get up early in the morning and be rested for his new job.

It seemed like the wee hours of the morning when a noise awakened him, a ringing sound that went on and on. His semi-conscious mind told him it was the telephone, but, oh how hard it was to get up. If the night had not suddenly turned chilly he probably would never have forced himself out from under the sheet, across the back porch and to the telephone.

It was Planche, and she laughingly told him it was four-thirty. "I know I'm dragging you out of bed a few minutes too soon, but it will give you a little extra time for safety margin.

"We're trying to get things straightened out here at the hospital. The doctors have been trying all night to settle Cliff's stomach, but they can't even get a glass of water to stay down. He's so dried out. His skin seems parched. One of the doctors thinks he's got an obstruction in his colon and wants to operate. Cliff won't hear to it. I'm going to call his sister up in Oklahoma and see if she can get him to listen to reason.

"Now, you go on with your job, and don't worry. We'll get things straightened out, probably by the time you get back from work this afternoon."

She gave him some last minute instructions about where to find bacon and eggs and to please set a sprinkler going in the vegetable garden. She would be home some time this morning to shut it off.

Breakfast came off faster than Roy thought it would. After all he was spurred on by the thought that in a few minutes he might see the handsome driver. Day was beginning to break as he walked the four blocks to what was now Zilla's filling station. A scattered group of people were already there, three or four of them looked like early commuters waiting to catch the bus, and, sure enough, some sort of commotion was going on between the back porch and the locust tree. All the rest of the area was dark.

All the lights around the filling station were off. Even the little bulbs on either side of the dinosaur were turned out so the sign was only a ghostly shadow in the pale light. You could see a heavy padlock on the door to the store. It was almost concealed by a big floral arrangement, white chrysanthemums, hanging from a hook that had been placed impressively above eye-level. Two long, black, silk ribbons hung down from the flowers to within a foot of the sill. Leon's business house was certainly closed down.

Both rooms of the little dwelling house were lit up, and a bright bulb, probably a hundred-watt, glowed from the top of the back porch. The backdoor was ajar but not really open, and it too was draped with a professional arrangement of white chrysanthemums and black silk. Over in the shadows you could see dim outlines of the oil barrels and the grease rack. The locust tree was a mound of dark leaves. Its uppermost branches were not yet lit by the breaking day, but the bottom ones were outlined broodingly by the rays of the hundred watt back porch bulb.

The same bulb dimly outlined a city bus parked in the



rutted vacant area that spread off behind the little dwelling. That, no doubt, was the disputed area. Leon must have let city buses park there for nothing, or perhaps he had an informal arrangement with the officials to sell them gas and oil for the privilege of leaving in-bound buses there over night.

Roy locked the big vehicle over carefully. It was closed tightly, probably locked. The back seat area was dark. Dew had begun to form on the top and sides. When he got close enough he examined the mirror frame. It was the banged-up one he had helped Larry straighten yesterday.

You could smell coffee brewing in the back room of the dwelling, and Zilla, slowly sipping a cup, was draped languidly on the railing of the back porch. She was wearing a pink cotton housecoat, cut in a style currently in the rage. Her hair was bunched up under a black net made of cords so heavy it seemed more like a snood. Her facial features were reduced to a blankness that could have been caused by stultifying grief, and her eyes looked blankly at the leaves on the locust boughs. Once her glance wavered and passed over Roy, but she showed no signs of recognition.

A short distance from her stood a plump woman about five years older than Zilla. The family resemblance between the two was so pronounced they could only have been sisters. But the plump one had definitely gone beyond youth and slipped into middle age. Her brown hair was also pushed under a net, but the net had holes in it and stray curls sprouted out here and there. She was beginning to grow a double chin, and her figure was quite lumpy. Even at this early hour she was dressed

for the battles of the day, not in a housecoat, but in a yellow uniform popular with waitresses. In fact you got the impression this woman might have been slinging hash for about twenty years. That was what she was talking about now.

"--Truckers might come in here. Them kind has got to have a lotta room or they won't stop. If Zilla gets her little coffee shop set up she's got to have room for customers to park in. This piece of property's a valuable corner. Zilla can't go givin' expensive rights away--"

The man standing in front of her carried on with her thought as though he were used to doing so. "--Very expensive rights. I've heard of the City paying five thousand dollars just to lease a place to use for a parking lot. Now, we've been goin' through Leon's things all night and we can't find hide nor hair of no contract with nobody. We called up the city people yesterday evenin' and just downright challenged them to produce a contract, and they just give us a runaround. I don't think no contract exists. Zilla was real close to him the last two weeks when she was nursin' him, and he didn't say narry a word about a contract--"

Perhaps the man had gotten up later than the plump woman, obviously his wife, because he was not as completely dressed. He wore only blue overalls and a white cotton undershirt, no shoes nor socks. The gravel under the locust seemed to cut into the soles of his feet. He was about his wife's age, not quite touching fifty, and the years had toughened him into a nervous wiriness. He kept bouncing back and forth on the gravel as he talked. His abundant blonde hair was slicked straight back from his forehead, and he must have been used to wearing

a shirt that he kept tightly buttoned at the collar, because the collar-line was where the deep tan of his face and neck switched to palid white.

The pair were so keyed up they would have expounded their legal standing to any audience whatever, even one that had not invited them to do so. But it seems they had some opposition of sorts. Four commuters were standing loosely around the door of the parked bus. You could tell they had been doing so every week-day morning for an indefinite time. Now they were sheepishly looking at each other as though they weren't sure they belonged here, but were plucky enough that they were not going to be shewed out to the street on no more than this man's word.

One of the four was a soldier, a sergeant with rather fine features. He kept a rather dignified pose and even had a newspaper unfolded and was pretending to be disinterestedly reading it by the one hundred watt light. Probably he was a yankee draftee stationed down here in the South and felt himself above such petty arguments. About five feet away from him was a local girl dressed in a frilly white dress with lace tatting around the top and bottom. If the soldier had given her any encouragement at all she would have looked at him instead of the man in overalls, but he did not. So she bit her little fingernail and glared at the plump woman.

The other two commuters were stout women dressed in sensible cottons and looked like cooks for rich families downtown. One was snorting at everything the man in overalls said, and the other was openly airing her side of the case. She really did not have much of a side to air, but you heard it anyway.

"--I've always got the bus here. This locust tree's a landmark. Everyone knows it's where the bus parks. Mrs. Voles expects me to get the bus by this tree. Sometimes her oldest daughter comes by and picks me up. She expects to find me here. The bus is sittin' here. Why can't I wait here to get on it. That nice driver will be along any minute. What'll you say to him when he shows up?"

The man in overalls avoided answering this question. So the woman continued, addressing the air more than anyone in particular. "Mrs. Voles has got three daughters and two sons. Her husband is in a wheel chair. Who's going to fix breakfast for them if I don't get there on time?"

The fact that she was in no danger of missing her bus did not keep her from pushing the situation to that possible extreme. She continued talking about Mrs. Voles and the intimate details of her job. Roy was trying to catch Zilla's eye. It seemed important that he get on friendly terms with her. If something should develop between him and Larry he must not let himself get turned cross-grained in the community. If he showed up the least bit odd the driver might drop him. Zilla, however, kept up the pose of one in an emotional shock. Absent-mindedly she drained her cup of coffee then stepped back into the kitchen to get some more.

Just then a car drove down the highway from the direction of Pristine and swung around the side of the filling station and stopped on the far side of the bus.

Roy's heart beat faster. He could tell the car was a 1934 Chevrolet. He could tell the driver wore a visored cap

like the one Larry had pushed back from his bald head yesterday. But nothing else looked the same. Even in the semi-darkness he could tell the man driving this car was too short, too stocky. He moved slower and seemed grumpy and unfriendly. He could not be Larry.

The new arrival matter-of-factly gathered up some personal things, got out of the Chevrolet and locked it. He carried a black metal box that must have been his change tray over to the bus, and while he fumbled with a ring of keys he looked the situation over. Once he glanced at the man in overalls then paid no more attention to him.

The crowd waited to see what was going to happen. The relative in overalls pranced uncertainly on his bare feet. The new driver unlocked the bus door and got inside. With a flip of his stubby fingers he turned on the lights. Then he slipped his change tray in a slot under the dash board and locked it in place. The seat did not fit him, so he adjusted it to his height. Neither did any of the mirrors. So he rolled down the window and pressed the left-hand, outside mirror in a suitable place. He adjusted the mirror over the windshield, and stepped over to the door and looked at the outside mirror on the right side. He could tell it had been banged up, and with a sour face he worked it around to fit his own vision.

The man in overalls advanced. "Are you goin' to drive this thing?"

The stocky man grunted something that might have been, yes. Overalls wanted to know what happened to the other driver. He got no answer. The kitchen door opened and Zilla came out

with a fresh cup of steaming coffee. Did she glance at the new bus driver? Roy could not tell.

The cook who worked for Mrs. Voles spoke up. "You ain't the same driver." Her announcement got no more response from the new fellow than had the questions from Overalls.

Zilla's plump sister stepped in and said, "This bus is on private property. You've just parked your own car so it's trespassing. Leon died yesterday. My sister's in charge here. You'll have to get off."

The man did not move off. He started the bus motor and said, "Let's go folks." The soldier sniggered, and the waiting commuters obligingly filed on to the bus. The confrontation between the new heirs and the city employee had fizzled. At least this morning no one was going to jump to the new owner's tune.

A fresh breeze had sprung up, and as the bus rolled toward town it bathed the faces of the passengers and perked up their spirits. The sun was tipping the horizon and the soldier now had enough light to read his newspaper. The voluble cook had taken a seat directly behind the new driver, and even though she could get few responses out of him, was entertaining him with her duties at Mrs. Voles'.

Roy was dismayed. The further they traveled from Jones's station the more he realized his link with the handsome Larry was all but snapped in two. Zilla knew him, but Zilla was obsessed with her role as heiress. On top of that she might be hostile. Maybe this new bus driver could give him some leads, perhaps even drop Larry's last name, but he was not talkative, and the cook had taken the seat directly behind him. Roy was

nearly downtown before he saw a chance to act. The cook got off to transfer to another line, and before someone else could scoot into her seat he forced his way forward and sat directly behind the driver.

It was difficult getting him to talk at all. But he finally said he wasn't acquainted with the man who used to make this run. Last week his boss had told him he would be taking over the early River Terrace route today. And so today he started driving it. That's all he knew.

The day turned out cooler than the ones before. A wind stirred up in mid-morning, and thunder heads began to rise just before noon. Roy soon got the hang of the job. Their chit shack was a little traffic island by which trucks flowed on either side. Pearly took the right-hand lane and gave Roy the left. The truckers seemed to come in bunches so there were periods when they could hardly pick up chits fast enough and other stretches when they could sit down and talk.

Most of the morning Gates had his mind on far off things, national politics, European immigrants, the Japs. Roy noticed the truck drivers tended to treat him in a light manner, winking at him and kidding him along. And although Pearly kept a careful tab on Roy's work, it was easy to see that the boss wasn't any too good at keeping the chits in order himself. Certain hooks stacked up with too many colors. Others were left bare.

As the morning progressed absent-mindedness descended on the man like a fog. For short stretches he would shake it off, then it would drift in again. By noon several of the drivers

saw their chances of getting their records right were better with the new man, so the left lane began to stack up with trucks. Roy was rushed. The old man didn't seem to notice. Certain truckers went even further and asked Roy to glance at the chit board and see if old Pearly was getting their loads tabbed right.

The more spare time Pearly had the more he opened up and talked. Soon the questions he threw out began to form a pattern. What did Roy think of John L. Lewis? What did he think of labor unions in general? The drift of his talk became clear. He was a union man, one who was all the more frustrated because he was working in a place where union activity was not allowed.

Roy came from a world that tended to scorn unionism, but he had sense enough to string old Pearly along. Gates took that as encouragement and was soon warning him. "You can't open your mouth on a government job. The bosses here won't stand for it at all. If you let on like you know what an organizer is they'll transfer you to the shittiest job on the project. If you keep on they'll find something wrong with your work and fire you. You got to keep your mouth shut."

A thunder storm came up in mid-afternoon and dropped a flash shower on the dusty roads. The trucks kept coming, and for awhile the two men had to work in heavy rain. Gates had thoughtfully brought a raincoat for just such an emergency, a slick yellow one that seemed to sweat your body into as moist a state as raindrops would.

The sun came out. The clouds began to roll away, and the whole country-side looked fresh. Gates began to get more par-



ticular about his questions. He noticed he had brought a sack lunch instead of a bucket with a thermos. Was he broke? "If you are," he added before Roy had to embarrass himself with an answer, "you can get an advance after you've put in four day's time. Ten, maybe as much as fifteen dollars. You see where that truck's taking a left hand turn beside the gravel pit? Well, hitch a ride with one of the truckers going in that direction and you'll pass by the pay-roll office. All you do is go up to the window and tell them you're new here. Be sure and say you just came from out of state. They may talk smart and ask you a bunch of questions, but keep your wits about you, and they'll shell out with about two-thirds of what you've got coming to you. Two weeks later you're entitled to some more. They don't like the news to get around that they give out little advances, but if a union was here they'd be giving out a whole check every two weeks. Everything you've earned. I say it's yours, so go get it."

Roy began to think this over. Four days would be next Friday. Ten or fifteen dollars. Why, instead of a meager summer he was going to end up as flush as he was last year at the flower mill. Maybe better off. No matter what happened to Cliff and Blanche he would have a nest egg to keep him independent. If Blanche stayed on at River Terrace, and if he kept his mouth shut, he'd be better than independent. He'd have money extra.

Of course all day long he had been thinking about Larry. Larry Whoever-he-was. This morning's disappointment and panic had turned into something else. So, last week Larry knew he was going to to be transferred or quit or whatever he had done.

So yesterday he had known he was perfectly safe to flirt with a strange kid. He'd never see him again.

The "something else" that Roy's mind was turning to was anger. For the second time he had been played for a sucker, as bad or worse than Lalotte had done.

It was quitting time. Roy caught the -ake bus into town then transferred to the line that went out to River Terrace. A youngish driver with pimples was on the afternoon run. Unlike the man this morning he talked quite freely. Soon a passenger was asking him about the mix-up out at Leon's filling station.

"Oh, we've got the word," said the driver with a knowing smile on his face. "The boss told us at noon. We can't park there any more. The City's had a parking lot out there all the time, a little old cubby hole stuck in beside a transformer. The drivers just didn't like to fool with squeezing in a tight spot, and they got in the habit of using Leon's."

Where the driver ended his run was, indeed, a tight place, a mere driveway directly under a power-line. Overhead you could hear wires crackling, and they led down to a little cement house that was fenced with heavy wire mesh and had "Danger, High-voltage" signs on all four sides of the fence. Across the narrow driveway was a heavy growth of river-bottom underbrush. If you stepped out in it your legs would come out covered with chiggers. A little way off, but out of sight, you could hear the river gurgling.

A half block down was Leon's. A noticeable change had taken place there. The chrysanthemums and black ribbons still hung on both doors. In fact an automobile had pulled under the

canopy, and its driver, a frown on his face, was leaning out his car window to better comprehend the pad-locked door, the empty gas pumps and the funereal decorations. He worked his jaw from side to side nervously, then started his motor and slowly drove off, no doubt hoping another pump would turn up further down.

But no buses stood in the rutted area. Instead someone had fenced Leon's entire block. It was a makeshift fence. Whoever put it up did not know how to build them. He had nailed one strand of kinked and rusted barbed wire to the back corner of the filling station. Since the building was stuccoed he had had to chip off plaster down to the wooden framing to get a place to sink in the staple.

Then he had led the wire out to scattered fence palings which he had driven into the ground to serve as posts. The wire and stakes enclosed Leon's property in an uncertain line and ended up stapled to the far corner of the old bachelor's dwelling. If you wanted to enter his house you would either have to jump over or crawl under the copiously spliced strand.

The back door to Leon's house was open, and his porch was piled high with an amazing assortment of junk. The mound was so huge it overflowed the porch railing. In breadth it almost reached the trunk of the locust. In height it went up half way to the porch eaves.

Zilla and her sister were cleaning out their uncle's worldly possessions.

The pile would cause anyone to stop and gasp. First, how had so much pure bulk been stored in so small a house and left any room for a person to move around? No wonder Zilla had

had a hard time finding a lone address book yesterday morning.

Next, what was all that stuff? Most of it was things an ordinary family would toss into the trash can. But this was more motley than that. Jones must have been raiding trash cans and storing up his treasures like a squirrel. You saw heaps of yellowed letters, either done up in twine bundles or scattered loose. Someone had been pinching the stamps off. (Zilla?) And there were photographs done up in gray cardboard frames, back date magazines, advertising circulars, cans, bottles, bolts, washers, wires, radiator caps, boots for automobile tires, odd ends of salt-and-pepper shaker sets. In fact, what wasn't there?

A big, amateur-lettered "No Trespassing sign was nailed to the trunk of the locust. Yet, Roy climbed over the strand of wire and walked over toward the porch.

Zilla was coming out of the house, her arms laden with a paste board box. She dumped it on the pile. This afternoon she wore yellow slacks and a pretty blouse of white cotton with red tulips appliqued around the neck. She still wore the black cord snood and a nondescript pair of shoes.

Her plump sister was bent over one edge of the pile snatching out items to be saved. She picked up a faded floor-pillow, a souvenir of the 1936 Texas Centennial, looked at it, brushed it, turned it over, inspected a mildewed spot, then tossed it back in the pile. She threw out a word of caution to her sister, "You'd better check every can you come across. No telling what might be in one." Then she seized a red rubber hot water bottle that had stuck together through lack of use. Carefully, she

pried at its screw cap, opened it and blew in it. It remained stuck.

Behind her was a little girl who had retrieved a rusted angel-food cake pan and was rubbing at the corroded spot to see if it would brush off. It was easy to guess her age--twelve--because her chest showed signs of development. The most noticeable sign was the outline of a brassiere showing beneath a thin-weave dress. If you looked closely you really could see faint bulges underneath it. Her dress was cut in too adult a pattern for a kid so young. It was also a funny shade of aqua that streaked into patches of gray. Had it once been white, then home-died?

The little girl showed other signs of being pushed into adolescence prematurely. Someone had already peroxided her hair, and she wore as much lipstick and mascara as Zilla. She and Zilla looked very much alike. They could only be mother and daughter. However, the mother had left off at least one item in an attempt to push her child into sophistication--shoes. The girl was bare-footed and tossed away the cake pan to pick a sticker out of her toe.

The three women looked up when Roy approached. Zilla still wore a blank look that could mean anything or nothing. The little girl twisted coyly, and the sister glared hostility. At any moment she might remind Roy of the no-trespassing sign.

Roy put on his best manners. "Excuse me," he said. "I wanted to speak to Zilla. Hello Zilla. You remember me, don't you? I was going to ride with you yesterday morning."

"Well?" she said. Did her flat voice mean she remembered him or not?

Roy decided it did, so he spoke right up, "I ought to come over and apologize."

"What for?"

"I was supposed to ride with you and Mr. Jones, remember? And I missed you."

She looked a little funny. Maybe she did not know what he was talking about, or maybe she was not used to people apologizing. In fact Roy was not used to it himself, even when he had done something worth apologizing about. People back in Grass Prairie almost never apologized unless forced to do so. Instead, you hotly defended your position no matter to what ridiculous levels it had fallen. Zilla was probably raised under similar standards.

Her funny look forced Roy into quick explanations. He started rambling on and on about how hot it had been and how he was not used to his heavy work clothes, and how he had looked every where for a water hydrant to quench his thirst.

"Every filling station's got a radiator hose. They're always out by the gas pumps," said Zilla. "Besides, there's one right there," and she pointed to the corner of the porch.

Sure enough, there at the corner, in plain view of the whole parking area, was a water hydrant.

Roy stammered and said the bus must have been parked so he couldn't see it. "I must have missed you by a hair," he said. "I feel awful bad because it might have made Mr. Jones get excited or something. It's awful to think I got him excited on his last day--"

His apologies were now rambling over into delicate territory, Mr. Jones's tribulations on his last day, and a slight

frown was showing on Zilla's face.

"Well, what do you want?" she asked.

What a blunt question. Hadn't he said he wanted to apologize? Of course there was something else on his mind-- what was Larry's last name and address? But he had hoped to slip around to asking this without her guessing he crossed the barbed-wire to find it out. Since he had already crossed over he had better go on.

"After I missed you yesterday I rode into town with the bus man. I mean I caught the bus into town. Larry was his name. Do you remember him? I helped him straighten the mirror frame."

"Larry?" she said. The word was a question, but you could not tell exactly what she was asking. Perhaps her mind was still befogged by the recent death, and she could only be alert during rare moments of clearing. For example, in the next sentence she rambled completely out of context. Instead of answering his question she said, "The funeral is in the morning. Didn't you know that? We haven't buried him yet." Then, still in the fog, she overstated her condition. "We're in mourning here."

In mourning. She was also in the midst of a pile of trash, and 'mourning' was completely out of character for Zilla's class. It was even more overdone than Roy's apologizing. River Terrace families did not go into mourning. They arranged a funeral as quickly as possible and wired the relatives to come. For one night and perhaps a half a day they got together, probably for the first time in years. Little moments of joy crept in as they got acquainted again. At the funeral they broke down

briefly and wept with abandon. Then they put the deceased in the graveyard, dried their tears and went home. Zilla must have been reading love stories serialized in Good Housekeeping magazine.

Roy wet his lips and got himself away from the apology.

"I lost my wrist watch in the bus when I rode into town. I was sitting right behind the driver. This morning someone said this Larry wouldn't be driving this run any more. I had intended to ask him if he found it, or if someone turned it in, or if he'd heard something about it--"

"What kind was it?" It was the plump sister who asked this question.

"Bulova," he replied. Roy had never worn a wrist watch in his life, and Bulovas were far too expensive for the Grovers to afford. The sister immediately asked how much it had cost.

"--A graduation present," he lied some more.

Probably the sister would have fired questions until she pushed him into a trap if Zilla had not broken in with one of her dreamy, off-the-subject abstractions.

"Larry's married," she said.

Roy turned pale. Two reasons brought on the paleness, one, the news that the bus driver was married, the other that this woman had brought this subject up so bluntly. Could she possibly guess what was motivating Roy? The woman was a dumb thing from a way off in the sticks. She wasn't supposed to know about homosexuality. How could this woman pull statements from the air like that? Maybe she wasn't all there. Maybe her period of "mourning" had addled her noggin. Her flat voice and the way she looked you in the eye would jolt anyone.

Roy got ahold of himself. Well, if she was going to bring the subject back to Larry he would take advantage of it. "If you could tell me where he lives I might call him on the phone, or--"



She cut him off. "I don't know where he lives."

Out of the corner of his eye Roy saw the sister jerk slightly. The little girl stopped twisting her barefoot against her dirty ankle and froze.

Roy kept on, still glibly. "I was talking with him. I can remember taking the watch off to set it. I had asked him what time it was. If you remember I was late getting to town. And I can remember--at least I think I can--the watch falling off, and I didn't notice it--"

"I don't know anything about a watch," Zilla said.

"I don't remember his last name. Do you know his last name? If I did I could go down to the main office the bus people have down town, and I could ask them if they know where he lives, or if they have heard of the watch--"

Zilla picked up this cue quickly. "Why don't you go down to that office and ask them. That's what you ought to do. They've got a lost-and-found outfit down there."

"Do you know his last name?"

"We don't have anything to do with the bus any more. We've got the place fenced off so nobody can get in." She said this significantly. The 'nobody' might mean "cy as well as the City buses. "They gypped Uncle Leon out of a lot of rent they were supposed to pay him. Leon was too mealy-mouthed to make them pay. They owe us five thousand dollars at least. I don't know a thing about your watch."

"His last name. Do you know his last name?" This was at least the third time he had asked. Too obvious. Far too obvious. The little girl had frozen, and the plump woman had jerked her body again.

"No, I don't. What do you want to know for?"

Roy stammered. "Excuse me. Thank you. Thank you very much--"

For what? All he wanted to do was leave, and he was avoiding answering her question. But she had answered few of his. Then why couldn't he break off and go? No, he stammered some more, about how sorry he was to hear about Mr. Jones, and he hoped everything worked out all right with the bus company, about the five thousand dollars they were supposed to pay.

Finally he broke away and walked the four blocks home.

A surprise. Cliff was not under anaesthetic in the hospital. He was in the front yard spading Bermuda grass out of the cosmos bed. He was pale-faced, but tossed the sod as though he were in the best of health. The yard and the whole neighborhood looked fresh. Everything was still dripping from the thunder shower. The sun was half hidden by one of the lingering clouds which caused light rays to filter down in shafts. In the northern sky a whisp of rainbow lingered on.

Cliff looked up, mopped his brow, and tried to make his "Hello" sound casual. But he could not conceal a sheepish smile.

Roy gasped and asked, "What happened?"

"Oh, nothing," Cliff said. "This shower will make the grass pop right out. I have to get after it."

Blanche appeared at the doorway. Her smile was even more sheepish. "Look at him," she said. "You just can't kill off tough old billy goats. They come back and dig up the yard."

Cliff, spading that much harder, made a cryptic remark about people spreading emergencies when there weren't any.

Blanche said, "Let's don't go into that again."

You could tell they had been having an argument, and the bickering, like the thunder shower, had not blown completely away. Cliff, grabbing at grass runners with venom, muttered about expensive phone calls. "Some people think if a phone is there they've got to use it. See how far they can call. Why didn't she see if she get Nome, Alaska or Panama. They can't even let one call do. They've got to keep the wires hot all night long."

Blanche sucked in her breath and rolled her eyes. "Roy, get your bath over with. There's a million things to do."

Her husband could not be thrown off the subject so easily. He kept mumbling about the telephone bill with a stubbornness and grouchiness Roy had not noticed in him before. Blanche retorted, "Roy, there's a letter from mama. People are going to be pointing guns at me all night long. I can see that right now."

"Guns is right," said Cliff, spitting the words down to the roots of the flowers. "You would think people could keep their fingers out of other people's mail. If they see an envelope they've got to split it open."

Roy brought his mind to attention. What was this about a letter from his mama? He had only mailed a plea for more money yesterday. The reply from Glorione couldn't get her for four or five days.

This letter turned out to be another bone of contention. Before he got the towel to take his bath Blanche handed him a slitted envelope. You could tell there were at least three pages inside. It was addressed to him. Blanche had a knowing

look on her face as she apologized for opening it. "I only saw the return address from Gloriona. Naturally, I thought anything from Gloriona was for me. I'm sorry I opened it."

As Roy took the letter he noticed Cliff had stopped digging in the flower bed and was standing on the cupola doorstep to give his wife a close look. A vague thought hit Roy that it might have been Cliff who had forced her to apologize--but for what? Anyway, it was nice having Cliff back him up.

As he slipped the fat letter out of the envelope a five dollar bill fluttered to the floor. Good old Mom. Money even before he asked for it.

And he should have known his sister better than that. Apology my eye. She had trapped him into letting that thing flutter out right in front of her. In the future he would be behind closed doors before he examined any letters from his mother.

But a nice feeling was warming him up. Right now he had about ten dollars in his pocket. When his mother got his plea for help she would probably duplicate her generosity and send him another five. Then there was that possible advance from his job. To heck with his sister. He was a free man--if he wanted it that way.

However, he wasn't too keen to kiss off River Terrace as a nasty experience. So he smiled sweetly at his sister's grim face, stuffed the five in his pocket and went inside the bathroom.

The hot water that he extravagantly drained into the tub steamed everything up. To get himself back to normal he must open the little patch of a window even though it admitted a dangerously cool breeze. Let the cold wind blow. A breeze on his face, hot water in the tub. A perfect combination for reading his mother's long letter.

Through the walls he could hear that Cliff was again spading in the flower beds. The telephone rang, once, twice, and he heard Blanche's voice, now much sweeter, saying, "Why hello, Velma."

The fact that Blanche let her voice turn sweet when she talked to the bitchy Mrs. Carnes disgusted Roy. He could not read his mother's letter. He must listen.

"--No, no, no. Nothing like that. He's outside digging up the flower bed. No. He wouldn't hear to it. The sun was coming through the hospital windows this morning. The nurse had just flipped his shade up. The doctors and I came in to tell him they were going to have to operate. There he was. Sitting up on the edge of the bed. He said he felt fine and wanted bacon and eggs for breakfast. It was all over just like that. Not another vomit. He would have gone to work today if I hadn't laid the law down to him. No. No, we don't know yet. He thinks he will pass his physical, but I won't let him make any plans until he's actually sworn in. We're left up in the air. We don't know what we'll do--"

It was hard to follow his mother's letter. All about her writing because she couldn't go to sleep there at her new place. "--I surely do hope the bus ride down was all right and that you had enough money to buy a good meal. I'm sitting here on this little bed, not much more than an army cot, out in the room behind the garage. I'm thinking about you and my other two children.

"Have you got a job yet? Are you getting along all right with Cliff and Blanche. Tell Cliff I think he's the best son-in-law I've got.

"I'm just thinking you may run short of money. I see I'm not going to need any if things go all right here at Blair's. I'll try to slip in a little extra before I seal the letter. I know you'll be short until you can get some cash coming in--"

Blanche's telephone marathon with Mrs. Carnes still filtered through the sheetrock wall. His sister was certainly taken in by that successful, but bossy, Mrs. Carnes. Women. They want everything, to rule and cling at the same time. Blanche was throwing her whole precious schedule to the winds just to gab with Velma. No supper. No nothing. "Everybody's mad at me today," she went on. "Black Tuesday. Even Georgia Thorpe got mad as rattle snakes at me when I called up to ask about Leon's funeral--"

Who was Georgia Thorpe? A faint bell tried to ring in Roy's mind, but the bath water was too deliciously warm. So confusing. He was lying naked in a steam bath thinking about a handsome bus driver when he should feel terrible about Cliff being called up. Well, he did feel terrible about Skirvin's life falling to pieces, but he also felt so good staring at his nakedness and thinking of his morning's conquest. He listened to his sister drone on.

"--She thought I was trying to butt in about Lilla's inheritance. Well, what those three sisters do is no skin offa my nose--"

Again the bell tried to ring. Sisters? Which sisters? "No," Blanche's voice continued to tinkle distantly past his warm bath water, "neither Cliff nor I can make the funeral tomorrow. Too many irons in the fire. Georgia can get mad by herself--"

Lilla must have a sister named Georgia. Probably that "relative" in the typing class. "--No, Georgia probably won't be at the typing class tomorrow night--" Yes, this Georgia must be Lilla's relative. "--No, I don't know what I'll do with my little class if Cliff goes in--"

Cliff in the Army. Hard to get used to such an idea. People from Oklahoma always hated the Army. "--Will he pass his physical, or won't he--" Distant bells. To heck with them. To heck with the guilty feeling. He would read Hattie's letter. His mother said she had only a twenty-five watt bulb, lost up high, which turned on and off with a string. The old lady Blair had lec-

tured her that very morning about wasting electricity. It looked like Mr. Blair's wife was going to be as cranky as she could be. Even though she claimed to be too sick to walk she had waddled out to the "maid's room" after dinner. She had spotted the radio Hattie had brought with her and said she would have to store it. Too much electricity. And she had huffed and puffed that everything had to be clean. The "maid's room" floor had to be scrubbed daily, this on top of the scrubbing inside the Blair household itself.

"--Mr. Blair has not been home all day. You know he got up early to come and take you to the bus and to pick up my things. Well, just as soon as he helped carry in my boxes he left. The old lady Blair said he had some business in Oklahoma City. So there's just that old crank and me here on the place--"

"Well," his mother continued. "I'll just have to make the best of it. When I told Mr. Blair I would take this job I had no idea his wife would be so picayunish. But there's no backing out now.

"The nursing home called me up tonight right after supper. They said a farmer came by and told Aunt Betty about us storing her furniture in the barn and renting the place out. The nurse said they were afraid they would have to put Betty in a straight jacket. She had a wall-eyed fit. It took two big men to control her enough to get a hypo in her arm. They were afraid she would have a stroke.

"All that fuss over a little thing like storing her furniture. I surely had no idea we were going to stir up a hornet's nest like that. Well, everything will come out in the wash. Do try to save your money. I can send you a little bit every now and then if you run short. Don't let Planche know

I'm sending it. The best wishes. I think of you children all the time."

She signed it off, "With love, Mother."

It was good to soak in a warm bath and better to find a composed household when he got out of it. Blanche was through phoning and was kneading minced salmon and flour to make fish patties. Cliff was through spading and was sharpening kitchen knives on a little grinder he had installed by the refrigerator.

"Now that we're all here," he said pleasantly. "We should take a look at what we've got to do. I think I'm going to pass my physical, so we've got to plan as though I won't be here after next Tuesday. Now, Blanche, I know you want to go to the induction center with me. But it's not practical. We can't break up household here that quick. You'll just run up a hotel bill. The Army won't have any place for you until I'm stationed some where permanently. That will take weeks, maybe months. They might even keep moving me around so I can't send for my wife at all.

"Roy's got a job and needs a place for the rest of the summer. Blanche, you've got your typing class which lasts until September. That pays money. We're going to need all we can get. I know it sounds crass and crude to keep harping on good old sound cash, but money is nice stuff to have. We're not going to go off half-cocked. We're going to use our heads.

"So, Blanche, you and Roy are going to have to fight it out here together the rest of the summer. Now both of you have got to act like grown-up people and get along. It'll only be for two or three months, then I'll know where I'll be stationed. It's a small adjustment for grown-up people to make."



His was a firm speech, spoken like the head of a grand household. Blanche was not that easily impressed. She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes and spoke. "Plans, plans, plans," she said. "You don't have to be so fat and pompous about it. You know I'll do whatever you say. Now then. There's that little business of Mama's five dollars we've got to get off our chests."

Then she opened her eyes and turned to Roy. "Roy," she said. "You know Mama has no sense about money at all. She strows it like wind scattering weed seeds. For the past eight or ten months she's been asking Cliff and I for little loans to get her by. Last April I got my head together with Rena and found out she'd been tapping her for little five and ten dollar hand outs too. Why she can't live on a teacher's salary I don't know. Well, I know where five dollars of our money went. It was in that letter addressed to Roy. That money wasn't hers to give away. Roy, if you want to keep it I can't make you give it back. But now you know where you got it. From us, not from Mama."

Roy said nothing. He was learning to save action for the right time and place.

A pause while Blanche glared at Roy and Roy vacantly looked back. Then Cliff said, "Well, that's settled. Now Roy, you've got to learn to drive. It's a shame it's been put off until you're nearly seventeen years old. So we're going to cram in driving lessons until you can pass your test next Monday. Let's get going."

That night, during the whole two hours Blanche was at her typing class Cliff patiently put Roy through his second lesson

of driving a car. It was nothing less than a triumph, for Roy caught on quickly, and his brother-in-law was pleased to say so.

Toward the end of the lesson Roy managed to drive the Ford down to a parking lot on the river bank. There he and Cliff watched the moonlight on the water for a few moments. What elation. Now he was a driver. Cliff was explaining something about using fire-flies for fish bait. "Pretty good on a night like this." To Roy what was good was sitting behind an automobile wheel (with a few dollars in his pocket) and looking at the black and silver shadows.

Blanche was calmed and pleasant when she got back from her typing class. Teaching a class seemed to give her the same kind of thrill that driving a car did for Roy. She took off her hat, a navy blue straw, which she felt compelled to wear even at night, and told how well some of the girls were doing. "Some are even doing better than Georgia. By the way Georgia wasn't there. She sent word she was sorry for the little disagreement. Well, I'm glad the day is ending up better than it started. Whew. Maybe the guns are silent for awhile," she said. Then impulsively she blurted out, "It's nothing to me what Georgia does about Zilla. If she wants to let her two sisters walk off with Leon's money what's that to me? It's just that she took in that old bachelor. Oh well, let them go to the little old man's funeral tomorrow. I guess after he gets in the ground all the smoke will clear away and River Terrace will get back to normal. Roy, you're looking into nothing again. Go to bed."

Before turning in the Skirvins talked a little more about ways and means. If, at the end of the summer, Blanche followed Cliff to some army camp it might be best to store the furniture and sell the Ford. It would be smart to look around

now for a prospective car buyer. Blanche wondered if Zilla Helton would be interested in a new car now that she had a little money. Again, Cliff warned her to stay out of that mess. He himself wondered about the little Fox boy, the one Mrs. Carnes had stuck in the car with him on his ride to the hospital last night. He had heard that both of Malcolm's aunts had a little money. The Ford should be a good car for a teenager like him.

Blanche huffed at this. She did not like Malcolm, she did not like Vinnie, nor did she like that other aunt, Dolores she thought her name was, who sang songs at Weddings and funerals. Cliff said, "Aw, heck. Let's go to bed." And so the night ended.

The next Friday Roy got a fifteen dollar advance. He also got a second letter from his mother with another five dollar bill inside. Hattie was glad to send it knowing it would be of help. But she cautioned him to do his best to get along with Blanche. The thought that her children might be fussing was unbearable. "Just don't let her know I'm helping you over the rough spots," she added.

Her thick letter was filled with more complaints about Mrs. Blair. "--I don't think this woman is sick at all, at least not any where but in the head. All her heart fluttering and palpitations are things anybody can have. It's when she gets to talking about all her brilliant ancestors that you realize she's been locked up in doors too long. She can go on for hours about how important her Uncle Ned was."

Hattie was also disappointed in Mr. Blair. "--He's gone from home more than he's here. Sometimes I wonder if he has

got any backbone at all, but is nothing but good looks and smooth tongue." She ended by reminding her son to save his money for college next fall.

Roy did save his money. His pile now amounted to some twenty-nine dollars since the daily bus ride had scarcely eaten up a dollar of it. To show how saving he could be Saturday morning he bummed a ride into town with none other than Mrs. Carnes rather than waste another dime on bus fare. Fortunately Blanche let him leave the house without asking where he was going. Down-town he hunted up the offices of the City Transit Company. There he told his story to three different people before he was directed to a lost-and-found department.

No watch of any description had been turned in, much less an expensive Bulova. It was nearly noon, and the man in charge of lost-and-found was eager to get rid of Roy so he could close up for the week end.

"How come you to take an expensive watch like that off?" he asked.

"I was asking the driver if he had the right time." By now Roy's lie was so laden with detail that he almost believed it himself.

"Wh t driver was it?"

"It was the first time I had ever seen him. But a women on the bus called him 'Larry'."

"Oh, that's Larry Thorpe. Tall man? Not much hair? Well, Larry's changed runs. Let's see. I don't know--wait a minute--I think. No. I don't know which route Thorpe's on now." He pronounced route to rhyme with kraut. Bells rang in Roy's head. Thorpe. The situation was complicated but not hopeless. The man had another idea. "Tell you what, why don't you phone him up and ask him if he found it. Larry's usually home Saturday

evenings. No, wait a minute. I'm not supposed to give out any phone numbers. No, I guess you'll have to come back Monday."

A surge of triumphant calm settled over Roy. Balboa probably felt that way when he broke through the jungles of Panama and sighted the Pacific Ocean. Quite casually he came up with an alternate plan.

"I'll be working all day Monday. Why can't I write Mr. Thorpe a note--just to leave my name and address in case he found it?"

The man thought it was a good idea and handed Roy a sheet of paper and a fountain pen that had sweated out a film of ink around the lower part of its barrel.

Roy wrote: "Dear Mr. Thorpe. I don't know if you remember me. I'm the boy that got on the bus last Monday morning out at Leon Jones's station in River Terrace. You probably don't remember it at all, but I asked you what time it was. I'm sorry to say I was careless and lost my watch. Did you find it on the bus? It was a twenty-one jewel Bulova with a black dial, a sweep second hand, and an expendable, gold band--"

Roy included the McKirvin address and telephone number and signed it, "Thank you very much, Roy Grover."

Once outside he stopped at the nearest drugstore and located a phone booth and telephone directory. Some what to his annoyance he could not find a listing of a name similar enough to Lawrence Thorpe to spot the handsome man's address. But he considered this a minor set-back because most of the mystery was now cleared up.

Ella Melton's sister was his lover's wife. She took typing

lessons from Blanche. Her name was Georgia Thorpe. The nerve of Lilla unblinkingly saying she did not know Larry's last name. Ah, the lies we have to tell in life.

More information about Larry piled in that night. It might have been hard getting a lead on him at first, but now all sorts of facts were pouring in. Some of them were disturbing.

Most of Saturday afternoon was spent in a long driving lesson with Cliff. At the end of it Skirvin thought Roy was now good enough that he could spend Sunday morning practicing by himself. Monday after work they would find time to squeeze in the driver's test. Back at the house the two men went through Skirvin's supply of tools and crsted up the ones Blanche would be unlikely to use while he was in the army. After that was a bath, supper and washing the dishes. While they were listening to the news cast over the radio the telephone rang.

Blanche began a long conversation with Velma Cornes. At first she spoke in broken sentences, many of them cut off in mid thought. Then, impatiently, she said, "Oh nuts. He's already guessed we've got a party cooking. Why try to surprise him? I'll bet Art has doped it out too. If two men are going to be drafted Tuesday they can guess what their wives will fix up for them Sunday night. Now then, shall we invite a whole bunch or just close friends?"

Skirvin smiled at Roy as they listened to plans for his "surprise" going away party.

"--I'd like to get Georgia Thorpe out away from her home if there's any way to do it. My typing class is the only social life she has. She's as different from Lilla as daylight

and dark. You'd never think they came from the same family. No, I haven't heard any more about that inheritance mess. The filling station is still closed up. Yes, I know she's got two children. Yes, I know one of them is spastic. Yes, I've seen the little thing. Pitiful. But there's no reason why she can't bring both of them to the party. We could ask her, couldn't we? Why not? Oh, he'll probably be driving his bus. He's always driving it. We could go through the formalities of asking him, too, but you'll never get him there--"

Spastic. Yes, Roy knew what that was. He had seen a full grown spastic man pass through Gloriona once. He flopped all over the sidewalk while some woman helped him get in the car. Instead of speaking he mumbled and growled. No one could understand what he said.

"--I know they live out in Pristine, but is it "K" street or "L" street? I've forgotten. Yes, they have a telephone. It's written down in my little black book.

Then Blanche cupped her hand over the receiver and said, "Roy, be a good kid and look in the top, right-hand drawer of our dresser. Beside the vanity set. A little black address book. Bring it to me."

Roy was happy to comply, and in a moment he heard his sister reading out the address of Mrs. Larry Thorpe. "--It's one-oh-one "L" street. Their number is two, three, zero."

"L" Street in Pristine. No wonder his name had not been in the Fort Boomer directory. It meant he was even more rural than Blanche and Cliff were. And how much time did he have to spend with his wife and two children, one of them spastic, if he had to drive ten miles or more just to start his bus run?

Blanche was speaking phrases as though she were about to hang up. Roy wondered what she and Mrs. Carnes had decided. Would they invite Larry's wife to the party tomorrow night? From her words he couldn't tell. But when she finally placed the receiver on the hook Blanche looked thoughtfully in the air and said, "It costs fifteen cents to call out to Fristine, doesn't it? What do you think, Cliff? Should we invite Georgia? It'll mean she'll be fooling with her two children most of the time."

Cliff was in the bathroom brushing his teeth, and he muttered something about, go ahead.

But just then the phone rang. Blanche probably thought it was Velma calling back for some forgotten detail. She scooped up the receiver quickly. She was disappointed. It was someone else. "--I don't know," she was saying, and her voice had become hard. "--Maybe you'd better talk to my husband. How did you find out we were thinking of selling it? Oh. Ch. Just a minute, and I'll let you talk to Cliff. Ch. Ch. That sounds interesting. Oh. Well, you talk to my husband. Yes, he's perfectly well by now. Oh. No, we seldom go to such things, and he'll be down in San Antonio by then. Here, you talk to my husband. He can tell you about the car."

As she called Cliff to the phone Blanche wore a perplexed wrinkle in her forehead. "It's that little Malcolm Fox," she whispered. "He can talk smoother than any kid I've ever seen."

Cliff was no so impatient with Malcolm. He told the boy clearly how things stood with the Ford. "--We won't be selling it before the end of the summer and then only if Blanche and I are living somewhere very far off. We haven't decided on a price



yet, but we can offer terms if you can't pay everything at once." While he talked Planche stood indignantly to one side and wondered out loud how news of the Ford's possible sale had spread so quickly.

"We will keep you in mind," Cliff was saying. Then there was something else about a performance. Exactly what kind of performance Roy could not make out. Nor could he figure out what that had to do with the car, but you could guess that Malcolm was making any abrupt transitions of thought seem perfectly logical. Cliff spoke much more pleasantly to Malcolm than his wife had. Soon they were exchanging witty remarks. It startled Roy that a little kid like Fox could talk so confidently to an adult like Skirvin. Ah, they had changed topics again. "--Oh, you're not living with your Aunts this summer?" Cliff was asking. "--The Deaf Institute? Why that's a way out here on the north end of town. How do you get to the University? By bus? Well, good luck in your performance. Sorry I won't be here to see it. No, Planche seldom goes to things like that."

Then there was a pause, and Cliff said, "He's here. I'll let you talk to him."

Malcolm Fox had asked to speak to Roy, and his, Hello, seemed very nice. "You don't remember me." Yes, Roy remembered him. "We're all so glad to hear that Mr. Skirvin got well." Yes, Roy was glad too. "--And I wish him the best of luck in the army--" Roy said he didn't know what to think of that. Luck didn't seem to have much to do with the army. You had to wait and see how things worked out. "--By the way," Malcolm asked, "Do you like the theater at all?"

The theater. That far off world in New York. The one

he had secretly determined to break into. Roy dropped his cautious attitude, and more quickly than he intended, said, "Yes, I do."

Malcolm was asking something about what plays he had seen, and Roy realized he was not speaking of highschool productions but road shows with New York actors. He had to answer, "None."

Malcolm calmly passed over this glaring lack and casually said, "I'm in a play we're putting on at the University. I've just started in college this summer. Luck would have it I landed a bit part in something right off. It's not much. A walk-on. No lines at all. One of the lords in Oliver's court. The play is As You Like It. We'll be putting it on in two weeks. If you want to see it the other actors will be worth looking at."

Roy could not help but think that someone had missed a chance by not letting him speak any lines. At once he said, yes, he would like to see it. And just as rapidly Malcolm was passing on to something else--where he lived. "I'm also away from home for the first time. A little garage apartment I share with a friend. It's out near the Deaf Institute, not so far from River Terrace." And just as gracefully Malcolm was signing off. By now he seemed like an old acquaintance.

During the conversation Blanche had impatiently paced the floor, and when the receiver was on the hook she reached a decision. "Now that that little twerp is off the line," she said, "I'll call Georgia real quick."

Blanche's call was unsuccessful. Although she wheedled as skillfully as Malcolm had dropped polite invitations Georgia Thorpe could not be induced to leave her house. She seldom

went to parties, and Sunday night was one of the few evenings she and her husband had to themselves.

Blanche hung up and said, "Well, I tried anyway. Let's go to bed."

Next morning, Sunday morning, right after breakfast Roy must get out early to practice his driving. "Take it easy," Cliff said. "Don't do anything you're not sure of. Remember you just want to learn to be at home behind the wheel."

There was no doubt in Roy's mind where he would best feel at home behind the wheel. That was on the road to Pristine. All night he had been waiting for this moment when he could drive by Larry's house and see what it looked like.

Within three blocks of Jones's closed station the Texas country side set in with undisturbed rustic reality. The city ended so abruptly it was as though someone had drawn a circle around Fort Boomer, everyone had tried to jump inside it, and they had succeeded. Live oaks, corn fields and fruit orchards sprang up behind sagging barbed wire fences and weedy bar-ditches. The road itself, although black-topped, was crooked and full of pot holes. At least three times it made a sharp, right-angle turn to avoid someones barn or hen house. Fence rows were thick with weeds and grass. If you had tried to walk through the meadows chiggers would have eaten you up.

All at once you came to a little faded white sign that said, "Pristine City Limits". Beyond this were a few scattered shacks where Negroes must have lived. Beside the road was a green sign advertising Quaker State Motor Oil. Someone had used the "Q" and the "S" for target practice. Both letters were so full of holes you could hardly tell what they were.

Then you crossed a railroad track. The houses were a

little closer together and considerably bigger, but they were all old, relics of a by-gone age. Ginger-bread adorned the big porches. Nearly every house sported at least one bay-window with some stained glass trimming. Lightning rods sat on the roofs, and the backs were usually screened-in. The rusted screens sometimes hung down like tattered rags. Here and there was a neat, painted dwelling, but most were gone to seed. You got the impression this was a town of lonely widows living by themselves in shell-like memories of big households.

The highway turned to follow the railroad track, and opposite the track you passed the business section. At the beginning of it you noticed the high curb was painted "D" Street. You could look down the road and see that by "H" Street the commercial type buildings petered completely out. Most of the structures were made of old fashioned red brick or even of undressed quarry stone. All had smallish display windows, some even had small panes of glass joined together with metal striping. Several buildings were vacant with the windows boarded up, and at least once in each block walls and all had been torn down, and the lot given over to the weeds. Without a doubt much of Pristine had moved into the city, and the suburbs had not yet spread out that far.

All but two of the business houses still bore a device of old-fashioned graciousness---a permanent wooden awning built over the sidewalk. Originally the wood had been painted white, but one firm had repainted in apple green and another in shell pink. The two business that had knocked out the wooden awning had clearly done so in a fit of remodeling. One was a drug

store. Its front-wall of undressed stone had been refaced in a gaudy combination of white stucco and squares of purple glass. Above its front door, shooting up at least six feet above the roof's parapet, stood a new neon sign. Even on Sunday morning the word "Drugs" still flashed on and off in red and green electric lettering. Obviously the owners had taken out the wooden awning so passers-by could see the expensive new sign.

Similarly a cafe had been remodeled so you saw, from door top to roof, a coffee pot pouring flashing, yellow, neon tubing into a pulsating blue cup. After this a whole block had been cleared off, and the only other business-type structure left was far down on the corner of "H". Its wooden awning was still there, but above it, and visible only from the street was a little cross lit with an electric bulb, and the letters "Holiness Church". The plate glass windows below the awning had been blackened with a thick opaque paint from the inside. But down in the lower right-hand corner someone had scratched in letters big enough to be read from the street, "F-U-O-R".

The alphabet named streets continued intersecting the highway at right angles. But now, instead of being painted on curb corners, the street names appeared on small wooden boards set like X's on top of wooden poles. Originally, poles and X's had been painted white with black lettering, but the paint was peeling badly, and many of the poles were leaning far off from perpendicular. Dried weeds and dog pee had browned off everything for about a foot up. Pristine was not as fresh looking as its name implied.

"L" Street was so far from the business section it was nearing the north edge of town. If the handsome bus driver lived here he had really buried himself in the forgotten backwaters of life. But Roy reasoned there might be some explanation for it. Thorpe might have been born and raised here. One of these big houses with the stained glass trimmings might be his ancestral home, something he had inherited and hated to leave. Even if not, the town had a few nice, well-kept small houses here and there. He could see one behind the Holiness church, a neat, inviting white thing with a freshly cut lawn and a brass sprinkler already making rainbows on the yard. Over the two front windows the occupant had stretched green and brown awnings. Under them he had hung window boxes which were now bursting with pink phlox. Larry could easily live in such a house as this. After all, Kristine must be quiet and peaceful, and there could be many reasons why a married man with children would want to live here.

On the corner of "L" and main were the broken foundations of a cement building, probably a former dwelling since two large elms grew between the exposed foundation and the sidewalk. Perhaps a fire had destroyed it. Perhaps it had been moved away.

Roy turned the corner, and a block up "L" he passed the First Methodist Church. This was two buildings, a red brick meeting hall with concrete steps leading to closed oak doors, and a gray stucco annex with a sign, "Young People's Department" printed over the door.

A few scattered residences were lined up on "L" behind the church. Roy could see none that looked either large or neat. The first one was especially tacky. It was small.

At the most it could be four rooms, if they were tiny ones. More likely it was two large ones. It had never been elegant. No traces of ginger-bread adorned its simple front porch. Instead, two wooden posts held it up. Someone had hung a wooden swing seat from its beaded slat ceiling, only it was not a true seat. It was more like a baby's play pen suspended by two chains. A little boy about six years old was gently rocking the pen back and forth, and a little girl about a year younger was inside it holding on to the improvised, varnished railing.

Green cloth shades, cracked and pin-pricked, stretched almost to the bottoms of the windows. The owners did not want the outside world looking in. Behind the house you could see a cow lot with its small feed shed. A spiral of smoke was staining the rural air. It came from a fire built under an old fashioned, out-door type, black-iron wash pot. Clearly the little house didn't even have a hot water heater or the housewife would have thrown away that clumsy contraption long ago.

There was the housewife herself, bending over the pot, stirring her bubbling clothes. Roy could only see her back, but she looked fat and sloppy.

Something on the front porch caused Roy to glance back to that area. The little girl inside the play pen was standing at such an unnatural angle. Her head lolled to one side and her chest was thrust against the railing as though she could not keep it in any other place.

The truth dawned on Roy. Even as he glanced at the number tacked to one of the porch posts and saw that he was at one-oh-one, he realized he was looking at Thorpe's static daughter, and the fat sloppy woman bending over the wash pot

was Blanche's favorite pupil, Mrs. Georgia Thorpe.

Roy's first impulse was to gun the Ford and get out of there. He could not risk being seen. Thorpe might be peeking out from behind one of the torn curtains right now. The women might look up, remember his face, and connect up this incident if she met him later on.

Yet he had to drink in as much as he could the few seconds he had to spare. What was this man like? The picture was so different from what he had expected, so confusing. How could a man so handsome, so charming live here? And what was his wife like?

He must drive on. Quickly, he circled the block and risked driving by again. Nothing had changed except that Georgia was dipping some clothes out of the pot with a stick and was letting them drip into a wash tub. She was turned so he could get a glimpse of her face. Plump, but pretty. And, yes, she favored Zilla and the older sister.

Roy drove on to get a look at the neighborhood in general. Depressing. Worse than Gloriona or even Grass Prairie. He could find no fire department, and the city hall seemed to be a rented suite over the town's one dry-goods store. In fact, Main street was lined with oval-topped, rural mail-boxes. A bank of them stood on posts at the corner of "L". The residents of Aristine did not even have a postman but depended on a rural mail carrier. Everything was so small and dried-up. Roy had become entirely too used to driving the Ford. He wanted to get out of here.



When he got back home the Skirvins were at church, the last Sunday service for Cliff unless he should fail his physical. While Roy was in the house by himself Velma Carnes telephoned. Automatically he told her "lanche was at church.

"Oh, I'm not calling her," said Velma. "I'm calling you. How are you? how are the driving lessons? We all hope you pass the test. We're sure you'll get through it with flying colors. How is the new job getting along? How do you like racking chits?"

After several more questions she dropped in one that seemed as routine as the others, "Where's Malcolm living now?"

"Malcolm?" Roy was alert enough to pretend surprise. It gave him a chance to think.

"Yes," she answered calmly--not, Malcolm Fox, or, You remember the boy who rode with Vinnie, or some other explanatory phrase, just, "Yes". Yes, was such a short word, not long enough for Roy to plan an evasion, but he did the best he could.

"He's living with a friend," he said vaguely

"Where?"

By now Roy was composed enough to answer with another question instead of information. "Why, is he coming to the party tonight?"

"He called you last night. I'm sure he told you where he's living," was her pointed reply.

Roy was not experienced enough to throw her off track. He ended up by spilling everything that he knew, that Malcolm had a garage apartment some where near the Deaf Institute. He knew neither the street address nor the phone number. All at once Velma said, "Good luck with your job. See you tonight,"

and hung up.

Velma called again that afternoon when Blanche was there. Once more the conversation centered around Malcolm, and this time Roy was able to pick up a few more clues from phrases Blanche dropped. There had been some sort of row between the two aunts and Malcolm had secretly moved out from them. But he had only gotten himself out. Vinnie's watchfulness had prevented him from slipping out so much as his toothbrush. Probably, Dolores had financed his new garage apartment, much to Vinnie's rage, who was now trying to find out where he lived.

Blanche was disgusted. Those two neurotic old aunts and that Malcolm kid bordered on the abnormal. "Neurotic" and "abnormal" were high-sounding words she had picked up in her college psychology class. Blanche was also repelled to think of a seventeen year old boy living by himself. The fact that he was attending the University was merely an excuse for him to pull off something he shouldn't be doing.

Malcolm was not at the party. In fact, it was a dull thing in which Art Carnes ate two quarts of home-turned ice cream and brought a chorus of laughter by walking around with his stomach bulged out. He also flipped a fork so it landed in a glass of water two feet away and placed two un-boiled eggs in his mouth at once without breaking the shells. He challenged anyone else to eat as much ice-cream, do the fork trick or the thing with the eggs.

Just before dark he got all the men-folks in the backyard where he had rowed up twelve kitchen matches on as many fence palings. With a twenty-two rifle he managed to light, not shoot off, six of the heads. When challenged few of the

other men could get as many heads off, much less lit. Art was also a lively teller of dirty jokes and dropped a series of late ones as soon as he was out of ear-shot of the ladies.

Mrs. Carnes saw to it that her husband's boisterousness did not get the party out of hand. She entertained the ladies with mind-elevating topics and kept them politely seated in her living room.

Her living room as well as the whole Carnes house was impressive. Their three-bedroom residence was one of the most imposing in River Terrace. Their own "master" bedroom was equipped with a separate shower. The second one was kept neat and clean for over night guests, and the third was fixed up as a "den" for Art. There Mr. Carnes was supposed to practice the hobby of taxidermy. Five stuffed, or mounted trophies hung on the wall, two snake skins, and heads of a deer, a badger and an antelope. When he showed off his retreat to the men Art confessed that he hadn't gotten to doing any taxidermy himself. A cousin, who was a professional, had done the five pieces for him. Someday, maybe after he got back from the army, he hoped to get the tricks of the trade doped out.

The pride of his den was a secret panel that he could flip up and expose a book rack. The rack held six nude magazines. That is, the women pictured in them were almost nude. But carefully placed lace underwear covered up nipples. Seamed G-strings were so photographed to make you think vulvas were showing. But on closer inspection a sharp-eyed man could see it was only a fold in the cloth. A few of the male guests tittered too loudly. Carnes shushed them down so the ladies

would not get suspicious.

In the living room the women were cooled by an "air-conditioner". This was an aluminum box fitted over the lower half of one of the windows. It dripped water, and a fan sucked in the moist air. All other windows in the room had to be kept closed, and the noise of the fan forced Mrs. Carnes to raise her voice slightly. She didn't seem to mind.

She was able to astound her guests with numerous inside tips on politics and current events. For example, she had it on good authority that the first draftees would not be let out after a year. No matter what the present law said their tour of duty would be extended. The calmness with which she dropped this "bomb" was as effective as the news itself.

Around nine-thirty they had a Chinese checker tournament with a one hour time limit. The winning couple got a hand made pin-cushion and a beaded watch fob. By ten-thirty everyone was on his way home.

Monday Roy passed the driving test. Tuesday morning he barely got up early enough to say good-bye to Cliff. A handshake and an exchange of good luck wishes. Before breakfast Blanche drove him off to the station. There was no such thing as Roy's staying away from his job merely to see his brother-in-law off on the six-thirty train. So he cooked his bacon and eggs himself, and as the sun was coming up walked down to the bus terminal by the transformer station.

Tuesday night Cliff phoned. He had passed his physical and would be sent to a base in Colorado. It was too early to make further plans. Art Carnes, however, had not passed. A trick football knee had kept him out. He should be back home

late tonight.

All week Roy heard nothing about the "watch" he had described in the note to Larry Thorpe. Even though he plied Blanche with innocent sounding questions he could get no news indirectly from Georgia. Apparently she was still attending the typing class with no indication that something unusual was under foot.

Lilla's brother-in-law, the one who had attempted to shew off the new bus driver the day after Jones's death, was busy repainting the filling station. By Friday the gas pumps were taken out, and the little building was a brilliant yellow. Next Monday morning Lilla opened up the "River Terrace Coffee Shop". During the following week some of the bus commuters dropped in there for doughnuts. But Roy, not wanting to waste his money, did his waiting a half block down by the voltage meter. There were rumors that City Transit might buy out the new cafe.

Thursday night. Blanche at her typing class. Malcolm called up to remind Roy that tomorrow night he would be doing his walk-on in As You Like It. He asked again about the Ford car, and confessed that he did not know how to drive one. Would Roy teach him? Roy said he would. Next Saturday morning would be a good time to start.

Casually, Roy let the conversation spin on. "By the way," he said. "Are you still riding the city bus down to your classes at the University?" Yes, Malcolm was. Then Roy decided to make his big guess. "A friend of mine drives one of the Transit buses. He used to make the River Terrace run. Someone told me he got transferred to the Deaf Institute run. Do you know him?"

"What was his name?"

"Larry Thorpe."

No, Malcolm did not know him.

When the conversation was over Roy sat quietly in the empty house. The news over the radio would not be interesting. He didn't even turn it on. Instead, he got up and prowled through the top drawer of Blanche's dresser. He found the little black book and again looked up Mrs. Thorpe's address. Yes, beside the house number was a rural route in parenthesis. That's where the Thorpes would get their mail.

Selecting a fresh envelope he pecked out an address on his sister's typewriter: "Mr. Larry Thorpe, Route #1, Pristine, Texas".

Then he got a blank sheet of paper and wrapped up two ten dollar bills and a five and placed it all inside the envelope. Before sealing he must test it by holding it up to the light. No, the three bills were very visible. A dishonest mail clerk would foil the whole thing. For several minutes he experimented with various thick substances and ended up by wrapping the twenty-five dollars in a sheet of carbon paper. Perfect. Nothing showed up in his candling test. It would be as safe as any ordinary letter.

He sealed it all up, walked a block down the street and dropped it in the city mail box.

The house did not seem so empty any more. In fact he was able to go out to his back porch and get to sleep before his sister came home.

The University's auditorium had been built only a year from funds that somehow tapped oil fields in the western part of the state. In addition the building program had been con-

nected with a Federal re-employment project. The results were down right magnificent. Roy could not be sure if the architectural style was Spanish or Italian. A two-tiered colonnade, very much like the one that encircles the Doge's palace in Venice graced all four walls. The terracotta tile roof was edged with lace-like stone acanthus leaves in the ancient Greek manner. On your way to the box-office you walked across a swirling pattern of cream and rust flagstones, each set in a little brass rim.

Inside, big crystal chandeliers dwarfed the entr'acte strollers in the lobby. The auditorium itself was cavernous. Orange curtains of a pile material so thick it reminded you of animal fur ornamented in graceful drapes all the windows on the two long sides of the building. As you looked up to the ceiling, an arch which soared darkly from balcony to proscenium, you could make out sectional rectangles remotely glittering with metallic trim. The interior decorator had done a superb job of accenting vast dark spaces with voluptuous oranges and gold leafs.

The seats were cushioned in such a way that a current of air gently whooshed out as you sunk into their soft depths. Roy's seat was the third one over from one of the six aisles. He had to squeeze passed a well-dressed mother and daughter to get to it. The mother, slightly over weight and clad in a light pongee silk, had chosen the outer seat, probably in a protective gesture to keep it from looking like she was pushing her daughter out on the aisle. This left the daughter sitting right beside Roy.

She had dark hair done in hanging ringlettes, extremely

pale skin and vivid blue eyes. Her perfume was a very delicate sweet pea. She had folded her hands demurely in her lap and was looking toward the theater curtains. The mother, fanning herself with her program bent slightly forward to give Roy a rather obvious once-over. When she caught his eye she smiled in a matronly way, and resumed her fanning.

You could not feel the currents of any artificial air-conditioning, but the woman's fanning was really unnecessary. Some sort of hidden vent system kept the temperature quite pleasant even when the auditorium filled to capacity. Just before the house lights went down the girl turned her head to let her gaze sweep across the indefinite expanse of hairdos, necklaces, pretty silks and severe tan and gray men's coats. Her survey ended with a glance at Roy, and she smiled. Roy smiled back, then turned toward the darkening stage.

The house lights were down, and the curtain was up. Right there on the stage was where he might be this fall. Were they vastly better actors than he was? Did he have a chance?

At first it seemed they were terribly good. Such voices. You could hear their every word. Such gestures. No one walked like that in a cow pasture. And above all their costumes were so gorgeous they made the expensive auditorium look cheap. Rich satins and velvets. A rainbow of colors that outdid anything he had seen in the quilt scrap boxes in the cellar.

But as the play went on he began to be slightly more critical. First, he remembered his program notes indicated all these fancy clothes had been ordered from New York. More oil field money, no doubt. He also noted other little things that brought the production down to a human scale. First, the



matter of legs. When Rosalind came out dressed as a boy you were allowed to see all of her beautiful legs. Her Elizabethan trousers were those striped, puffed things ending at the hips, and from there down was close fitting lisle hose.

All the boys, however, wore knee-length trousers. In many cases, such as Malcolm's, this was a blessing. Most of the boys had legs not too well filled out.

However Roy had to force himself to notice Malcolm's legs. The young fellow's total effect was quite good, and you tended to pick him out even though he had nothing to say. A tinge of jealousy touched Roy, but he quickly forced it away. He was enjoying noticing every little detail of what went on.

The actresses, for example, moved about with more authority than the boys did. Already they seemed to enjoy being full-blown women while the actors were struggling with unsure voices. And the gestures which had so impressed him at first later became rather wooden. No, none of the boys looked as though they had just come out of the saddle. Instead you got a sneaking hunch they had just slipped away from mama.

Roy soaked up everything between acts too. When the house lights came up the matronly woman smiled at Roy and asked if he wanted to get out. At first he said, no, but he was getting restless, so he changed it to, yes please. The daughter smiled as she pulled her legs back to let him ease past. It made him feel important to flirt with her, even in a vague way.

You could see that the local people had dressed quite well for the occasion. Such stylish clothes--on both the men and women. Had they gone all out in deference to Shakespeare or in deference to the new theater? Roy, still carrying out

his detailed analysis concluded it was the theater. Very few were really excited about the play. You heard remarks such as, "Yeah, that was pretty good". But more often you heard, "Isn't this auditorium something". In fact they moved about in the chandeliered lobby quite self-consciously. You got the impression everyone was afraid to look at anything for fear they would appear gawking. So people stared blankly at nothing instead of at those beautiful lights. Similarly, Roy was disappointed that no one commented on those lavish costumes. Did people in Fort Boomer see things like puffed shorts every day? He couldn't believe it. More likely their silence meant they were trying to appear blasé.

In fact he wondered if these were really residents of Fort Boomer. Many of them looked like old-maid school teachers dressed and posing as someone sophisticated. They must be the faculty and summer school crowd. Several of the men were talking about old so-and-so. Would he be back teaching this fall? And had thus-and-thus really got off to Mexico this summer? Had you gotten a card from them? Why didn't they talk about the play?

Roy still analyzed things throughout the rest of the performance. The boy doing Orlando didn't seem like a boy, more like a man about thirty-five years old, and Rosalind seemed to be over-awed by him. They didn't fit well together. When Orlando kissed her hand Roy wondered if he really enjoyed it. It came off a little fast. If he were up there doing it he would drag it out as long as possible to prove that he could.

In fact during the last intermission he decided to prove he could flirt with the girl sitting next to him. It was rough

going. Every time he asked a question it was her mother who answered. She was the one who smiled and gave a brilliant reply. The best Roy could get out of the daughter was, "I had a girl friend who took a drama course once. She said it was a lot of work." Then she turned to her mother and asked if she had brought any cough drops.

Roy was counting on an after-the-performance get-together with Malcolm. He was eager to get a glimpse of the kid's very own apartment cut away from restrictive adults. He figured he would have plenty of time to do so since Blanche had loosened up enormously after Cliff had gone away. She had even smiled knowingly when she cautioned him not to stay out too late tonight. That certainly meant he would not have to account for a little bit of time spent at Malcolm's.

But it turned out to be impossible to wait around the stage entrance after the performance ended. Roy had spotted an exit sign over double doors just to the right of the proscenium. It turned out these doors opened into a little odd-shaped anti-room with three walls and three exits, one to the auditorium, one to the outside, and one to the dressing rooms. Roy had been counting on running across such an easy access to the back stage area. But it was no-go. Quite a few people were trying to edge out this way, and for some reason one of the double doors to the outside had been left locked. So quite a little knot of people were jostling together in the three-sided room.

Roy, of course, thought he would slip over to the stage entrance, but he got no further than pausing in the line of traffic. A large man popped up right beside the entrance. He was extremely well dressed, suit, white shirt and neat,

blue polka dot bow tie. In a rich, resonant voice that could have wakened a deaf man on the back row of the balcony he boomed out, "Where you going, Puddy?"

And those people. Everyone in the crowded knot turned around to look at Roy. Someone went, "Humph." Postures stiffened on all sides. They were miffed that their dressy summer outing had been marred by a kid trying to crash backstage.

Roy immediately gave up the idea of slipping to the dressing room. For a fraction of a second a thought vaguely crossed his consciousness that he would exit and do his hanging around behind the arborescences outside. This, too, was cut short. The man with the great voice belched out, "No hanging around the stage entrance." A mind reader. A very touchy mind reader.

Malcom was not worth any further embarrassment. Even though this trip had cost him a theater ticket and a gallon of gas he would have to put off complimenting little Fox until tomorrow morning's driving lesson.

The driving lesson almost did not come off. Roy had taken Malcom at his word when he set the time at "bright and early", and was at the north-side address when the sun was hardly an hour high.

It turned out the "garage apartment" was one of a cluster of rooms that had been crowded into the back yard of a large, old-style residence. A generation ago the residence would have just missed being called a mansion. Now the front yard looked ragged and was shaded over by a species of spreading pine tree which had filtered decades of needles through its boughs and dripped them on down to the ground. The gracious front door was topped with a fan-shaped, glass crystal transome. On the

panels of the door itself was a blue and white p steborn sign, "Rooms and Apartments for Rent".

Across the street was the deaf institute itself. It was encircled with a high stucco wall and a row of enormous magnolia trees. Right by the institute's front gate and just opposite the dripping pine tree was a little metal sign by the curb that said "Bus Terminal".

Roy followed a flagstone path sandwiched between two privet hedges to the complex behind. At least fifteen units had been crowded in the back. Just enough space had been left to place fifteen garbage cans and to build a sidewalk between the residence's screen-porch and the balcony-staircase of the apartment house. Malcolm was on the top, right end, but he was not up.

Roy's door pounding finally brought sounds of someone sleepily turning over in bed, of reluctant steps crossing the floor, then the door opening a crack. Toward the top of the crack Roy saw an eye and part of a face. Even a part of a face was enough to identify the man. He had performed Orlando last night, and in the early morning light he looked more than thirty-five. Roy's interest as well as his uneasiness began to mount. Was he knocking on the door of a homosexual nest? If so, was he going to get into trouble? Probably not if he played it carefully.

Orlando hesitated a moment as though he were trying to place Roy. But it didn't seem to matter whether he could or not. He politely opened the door to the stranger and said, "Come in."

Would Roy be looking at a man dressed in nothing? Would

little Malcolm be stretched out indecently on the apartment's one double bed vacantly staring at the ceiling? Would beer bottles and stale cigarette stubs litter a dirty carpet? Would the undressed man wink at Roy knowingly causing Malcolm to rise from his wrinkled sheet and glare jealously across the room's layers of smoke?

Well, not quite. The thirty-ish actor was primly dressed in a suit of cotton pyjamas. When new it had been a light blue print with a contrasting navy blue band around the button holes. Now, many washings had faded all into a grayish blend of lights and darks. All the buttons were fastened on this summer night, even the top one, and if he had hair on his chest the button work covered it all up. He was not desperately in need of a shave. A good guess would say he could go another day before stubble would be noticed. If you looked closely you could see a smidgeon of grease paint in his hair line. But if you had known he was on stage last night you would not guess what it was. You got the impression he was fussily neat.

The apartment was as well kept as he was. Whatever street clothes he had worn to and from the Doge's Palace last night were out of sight. Even a pair of well-polished shoes were placed accurately within a foot of the end of the bed. The socks were left to air beside them.

The bed was a miserable, homemade thing of single width. Its plywood foot and headboard were not cut square with the world. A decorative edging made of plaster lath looked silly. The mattress sagged. The sheet had a re-sewn rip. Yet you could see no mote under the springs, and the bed stand along side was more than neat. It was graced with a blue willow-ware vase

and crepe myrtle flowers. True, the flowers were rather badly wilted but that could be due to the fetid atmosphere in the room. Beside the vase was an opened copy of War and Peace.

The place needed airing out. Someone had moved in a large number of bookcases, impossible in a glance to count how many. But they lined two walls and extended from floor to within a foot of the ceiling. You could tell they were also homemade, but done with much more pride of workmanship than the bed. They looked dignified and very solid and had recently been stained with light oak varnish. The odor from the stain filled the room and struck you as soon as you opened the door.

Just how sensitive was this man to foul odors? It was hard to tell. All the windows were closed, indicating he had some sort of tomb complex, but he had compensated by placing a large fan on the floor. It was an expensive brand with a flashy chrome-plated protective grille, and its oscillating arc swept from the head of the bed to the foot.

The bookcases were what impressed you. They were jammed full. Most noticeable were rows and rows of tightly packed phonograph records. Books, perhaps, took up half the shelf space. Maybe ten percent of space was left in niches where he displayed a collection of oriental flower vases. They were not Woolworth stuff, but neither were they cloisonne.

Two doors, both closed, led off to other rooms. A surprise. Malcolm not only had his own bed, but private room. At once Roy began to wonder just what went on here. He had a disappointed feeling that maybe nothing did.

The man readily showed Roy to a newly varnished chair, and immediately assured him it was safe to sit in by testing

the finish with his finger. "I would say it's no longer sticky," he said with an over emphasis on correct enunciation..

With Roy seated he introduced himself. Marion Tolliver. Too bad, Roy thought, that his first name had to be one that was shared with the girls. But this didn't seem to bother the man at all. He moved about with a posing attitude that suggested conceit. Something about the way he pronounced his own name said, "You've heard of me before. Here I am in person."

Marion Tolliver. Yes, a light was dawning in Roy's memory. He did recall such a name printed on last night's program, but nothing had made him think of it until now. When Tolliver learned that Roy had come to see Malcolm he frowned slightly, looked at a niche in the bookcase, one not filled with a vase, but a Baby Ben clock, and said. "Yes. Oh yes. It's time he was up and about. Excuse me. I'll get him out of bed."

He walked toward one of the doors and tapped on it. No answer. Then he turned back to Roy and said. "Getting Fox to fall out may take longer than you think. Would you care to listen to a portion of my phonograph record collection while you're waiting? You may have noticed the player over here. I designed it and built it myself. By designing I mean I figured out the line of current myself and installed a dual speaker system myself. The resulting fidelity is out of this world. I apologize for the drab looking case. I wanted a maple finish, but could only afford plywood."

Roy looked and saw that one of the bookcases was closed in at the bottom with a plywood facing cut with two circular holes each covered with a rust colored cloth. But records this



hour of the morning?

Tolliver saw nothing wrong with the idea and pulled out the plywood area of the bookcase. It slid out on concealed runners. He opened a lid and turned to ask, "Do you like Madame Schumann-Heink? I've been collecting her since I was fifteen, and I'm proud of some of my titles. You know, certain of her recordings are extremely rare. They set you back fifty or sixty dollars each if you go in for the original waxings. Luckily, I've been able to borrow and re-record a pair of the rarest. I'll play them for you."

Schumann-Heink this hour of the morning? If tapping on the door had not awakened Malcolm Madame Schumann-Heink ought to.

Muffled notes of a piano and the ghost of an operatic voice rose above scratching noises from his first recording. "Go ahead and enjoy it," Tolliver said. "I'll go after Malcolm."

This time he opened Malcolm's door and walked in. Roy got a glimpse of a room as chaotic as the front one was neat-- floor, chairs, and bed frame draped with unhung clothes. Books on the floor. A tray of unwashed dishes on an over crowded dresser. Malcolm was an amorphous lump wrapped up, head and all, in a single sheet. Those two must have had arguments about room temperature, because Malcolm had thrown his window wide open. The morning breeze blew the torn lace curtain around, and a puff of it mercifully blew into the front room.

Tolliver went to the bed and shook the form under the sheet several times. "Roll out, Goddamn it!" he called several times. It was startling to hear these words pronounced

in correct stage diction. At first the form moved slowly. Then, all at once, the sheet flew off. Malcolm, his hair flying in all directions and face greasy from last night's make-up, looked at the world with wild eyes. "What time is it?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Tolliver didn't answer. Now that the kid was up he, evidently, thought his job was finished and came back to entertain the guest. Grover would not be allowed to miss any of the rarities on his Schumann-Heink treasures. "Notice the tonal variations in the piano in separate parts of the recording," he pointed out. "What they tried to do was dub in a whole new piano accompaniment about ten years after the original recording. They didn't get all the first piano blotted out, and it comes through, here and there, as a ghost echo. Get it? There it is. No? We'll play that groove again. Possibly, we might get by with turning up the volume."

You could tell that turning up the volume would be a problem, one that he hadn't successfully solved. Apprehensively he looked about. "Windows closed, I suppose. They are in my room at least. We've had some complaints from neighbors. Flimsy walls in these make-shift backyard buildings."

Clearly he had not been brave enough to tell the complaining neighbors to go to hell, but he was bold enough to discipline his apartment mate. He marched straight into Malcolm's room and said, "Close your window, Fox. I'm going to turn up the volume."

Malcolm had switched from deep sleep to high activity very rapidly. Already he had donned underwear and trousers, and he was so rushed to get the rest of his clothes on that

he only muttered something about, "late, late."

"I said, close the window," Tolliver bellowed.

"Oh, pardon me," said Fox and rushed over to close his window. But after he had given it a hasty flip a stream of air still rustled the lace curtain.

"You've left a crack two inches wide," said Tolliver. He was exaggerating. You could hardly see daylight at the bottom of the sill.

"Oh, pardon me," Malcolm said again. Roy became uneasy listening to all of these apologies. If he had expected to drop in on an idyllic way of life he was beginning to be disappointed. Fox, holding up his struggle to get into a pull-over polo shirt, waddled over to the window and tried to raise the frame. Disgustedly, Tolliver pushed him out of the way and gouged the frame up himself. He poked his head down to peer short-sightedly and came up with an odd-shaped piece of wood that looked like half a clothes pin. He must find out how so weird a sliver had gotten into the room.

"And what is this object?" he asked holding it up. "How did such a thing get into the window? How can you stand so much air blasting over your bed? How can you let the street dust and alley garbage filter over the whole apartment?"

"Oh, sorry," said Malcolm, and darted around Tolliver so he could push the window down himself. Then he struggled all the way into his polo shirt, raced back to his dresser to grab a comb and dab at his big mop of hair. "Late, late," he murmured again.

Tolliver stuffily carried the little slice of wood over to the waste basket and made a point of dropping it in. From

the ceremonious way he handled it you would think it could start an epidemic. As he was performing this rite Malcolm, wildly combing at his dark hair, rushed out to apologize to Roy.

"Sorry I over slept. I hope you don't think I'm slighting the driving lesson. I'm not. I want to learn very badly. Sorry my room is in such a mess. Sorry I could not meet you after last night's performance. Sorry I showed up so frightfully on the stage. I won't be but a minute more, then we can get started at the driving."

He rushed back to find more clothes, and Tolliver pompously returned to his phonograph. "Ah. At last we can resume," he said, turning the volume up slightly and replacing the stylus. The squawks came through the twin speakers again, and Tolliver bent so his ear was close to the rust colored fabric and said, "It's almost here. Just a minute. Wait. There it is. Get it. A classic example of a ghost echo."

Roy mumbled, "Yes, interesting." But he was not in the least interested. His mind was on something far more urgent. If he had been wearing a wrist watch he would have been following the second hand closely. But since he had never worn one he kept his eye on the Baby Ben in the book case. Surely Malcolm would be able to get his mop of hair combed in another seven minutes. If he did the timing Roy had worked out would be about right.

According to the City Transit's printed schedule the number twenty-eight bus was due at the Deaf Institute terminal in eleven minutes. What he wanted was to be sitting in the Ford showing Malcolm the fine points of driving when the bus

pulled in. The Ford was parked in front of the residence part of this complex, and across the street was the bus terminal sign.

Did he know that Larry Thorpe would be driving it? No, not at all. He was taking a long chance, which was the only thing left for him to do. For two weeks he had been gathering scraps of information here and there. All of his inquiries had to be oblique ones so no one would get suspicious that he was chasing after Larry Thorpe. For example, one day he had casually asked the driver on the lake to down town run if he got Saturdays and Sundays off. In this way he drew it out of him that all city bus drivers must rotate their schedules so that they got week ends off only once a month.

Once a month. So if Larry Thorpe was on the Deaf Institute run the chances were three to one that he would be driving today.

He had also pumped the driver on the River Terrace morning run. Did most of the drivers start their day by going from the city center out or vice versa? No, his talkative driver said, it could be either way. If you lived out on the edge of town you usually got a run that began out in the suburbs.

Well, the city map showed there were only two terminals on the north side of town, one at River Terrace, the other at the Deaf Institute. Pristine lay directly north of Fort Hooper. When Thorpe switched runs he probably changed over to the number twenty-eight line to the Deaf Institute. And if Roy's calculations were wrong he had the rest of the summer to try something else.

Try something else. Like what? Sending him more money? Had that brash move also failed just as the note about the fictitious watch had brought no response at all? Thursday he had mailed the letter. Yesterday Thorpe had gotten the twenty-five dollars. Today, Saturday, some shock waves ought to be going out. Today it was important to get a glimpse of Larry Thorpe, not to go up to him, not to speak to him--already he had shown Roy he was dropped--but to look at his face and read the response.

Would he be mad? Would he pretend he knew nothing about the letter, that he didn't connect it with Roy? It was so important to keep in contact with Thorpe, to show he couldn't stand being dropped.

He had to admit there was a faint chance Thorpe never got the twenty-five dollars. The postman delivered Kristine mail in the middle of the day. Georgia would be the one who got the letter out of the box since Larry was working at that hour. Did Georgia read her husband's mail? Blanche opened Cliff's letters. The best he remembered his mother had opened Ted's. And if Georgia did the same thing what was her reaction when she ran across twenty-five dollars and nothing else? She might have visions of a kindly millionaire. She might also suspect a lover.

Maybe his three pieces of money caused a row last night. Maybe the Thorpe household was in turmoil today. Which one would get the worst end of a quarrel like that, the wife or the husband? The wife would suspect another woman and probably would never find one. But Larry would know who sent it.

The minute hand of the Baby Ben clock was moving surprisingly fast. Tolliver droned on tirelessly about the fine points of his recordings. What on earth had possessed Fox to move in with a frigid old maid like this man? The kid had seemed so sure of himself the first night he had met him. Now

it seemed all his bravado had been bluff.

Right now he was rushing pell-mell around his room, like a woman in a stew, trying to get himself dressed. And like a screw-ball female, getting into clothes had not been a simple matter, but a tortuous obstacle course.

As he dashed here and there Roy could see he had succeeded in combing his mop of dark brown hair, and in washing his face until its texture looked more natural. His pants and shirt were on, but he was still padding about barefooted. In a voice that was beginning to lose its control he was muttering, "Where are those Goddamned shoes? Why can't I find things I put away? Someone hid them. Someone played a practical joke on me. Damn it, damn it, damn it."

Tolliver pretended as long as possible not to hear his roommate getting into a fizz. By now he had progressed to another one of his rarities, a record with Caruso and Schumann-Heink doing a duet. His nose was tilted into the air and his eyes closed as he listened rapturously. Malcolm could keep quiet no longer. He barged into the room.

"Pardon me. I hate to interrupt. Pardon me. But where in the hell did you put my Goddamned shoes?"

Tolliver opened his eyes, took a deep breath, and glared at him. "I? I did something with your shoes? Fox, it's time you looked at your life seriously. You cannot get up in time when you have made an appointment. You cannot close your window. You cannot keep from interrupting me when I'm trying to make your guest comfortable. Malcolm, I have spoken to you about this before. You are not mature. You were not mature when you moved in here, and you are not growing up any faster with me

then you did when you were under the wing of your two aunts. You say that you left them in order to grow up, but you have made no real attempt to enter the adult world."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Fox apologized for the tenth or twelfth time. "I can't find my shoes. I know I put them at the foot of my bed. Someone has moved them. I don't care if you do get mad, I'm going to say it. I think you moved them. You did it to pester me. Where did you put my shoes?"

Tolliver threw up his hands in despair. "Hid your shoes. Hid your shoes. The most childish accusation you could make. Why would I hide your shoes? Give me one good reason why I should bother to enter your room and surreptitiously hide your shoes. You have worked yourself into such a fit that you can't look properly. I'll bet you ten cents that your shoes are under the bed where you left them."

He took a dime out of his pocket and waved it in the air as he walked back into Malcolm's room, bent down on all-fours and looked under the bed.

He straightened up and said calmly, "Give me a ruler or something. I'll rake them out for you. They are only a foot or so back from the railing." And he reached up on the dresser, got a ruler and raked out a pair of shoes.

Malcolm's voice rose to a hysterical level. "You pushed them back there. I know you did. I looked under that bed. They couldn't be where I left them. You moved them. Damn you, damn you, damn you."

Tolliver slowly walked passed the screaming boy and came back to adjust the volume on his phonograph. "There are no ghost echoes on this one. I've checked carefully. It must be



a true original."

Roy was getting uneasy. Minutes, six of them, had already passed. In five more minutes number twenty-eight was scheduled to pull to a stop toward the front of the house and across the street. It was supposed to stay there ten minutes before it began the down town run. Roy wanted to make use of all ten of those minutes.

He had parked the Ford so it would be in full view of the bus stop. If he managed to get Malcolm down there at the right moment he could work the timing so he could be showing Fox things about the dashboard during the whole period the bus driver would be forced to wait across the street. If Larry Thorpe should be the driver Roy would be less than a hundred feet from his one time lover. Impatiently he began to fidget in his chair.

Poor Malcolm, getting into such a stew about an ordinary driving lesson. Roy had no idea the kid had considered this Saturday morning session so important. And why didn't he have sense enough to laugh at Holliver instead of scream? Roy hoped his pupil would calm down by the time he got into the Ford. What would Blanche say if he should come home with a bent fender? It meant Roy would have to use special care, doubly special since he might be keeping an eye on Larry Thorpe at the same time he was trying to get Malcolm to relax. But minutes were ticking by.

He had gotten up from his chair to pace the floor when Malcolm came rushing out of his room, his shoe strings in an untied state. Holliver blew out a breath of air and said, "Must you leave so quickly?"

Roy found himself pronouncing one of those silly apologies, "I'm sorry, I must" he said.

Malcolm gushed with apologies as he followed Roy outside like a puppy. "I'm sorry I'm late. Could we take just one moment while I tie my shoes? I'm sorry."

Roy was so afraid that the nervous kid would break a shoe string that he bent down and tied the shoes himself. He gave the impression he was in no hurry at all, and as he walked through the hedge rows to the curb he sauntered as though nothing was on his mind. Malcolm, once out of Tolliver's presence, managed to compose himself. As he prattled on he seemed almost like the confident youngster who had ridden into town with Cliff.

"I'm so grateful for this lesson," he said. "It's important to me. I don't know a thing about a car. You don't have to know much about the engine just to drive it, do you? I'll do my best to learn. I apologize for these clothes I'm wearing. I haven't taken a thing to the laundry since I moved in here with Tolliver. We've been busy with the play. I haven't even had a chance to rinse out a pair of socks or a shirt."

They were at the curb, and the bus was just coming down the street.

A disappointment. The man at the wheel could not possibly be Larry Thorpe. He was red faced, fat jowled, and at least ten years older than Thorpe. Of course he paid no attention to the boys whatever, as he made a U-turn at the end of the block and brought the bus to rest across the street. At once he pulled out a newspaper, leaned back in his seat and began reading the news, oblivious of the world around him.

Roy fought back the wave of disappointment, and a good thing he did, because Fox did not, indeed, know any thing about a car.

"A clutch," he said. "Yes, a clutch. What will happen if I do not put it in?" When Roy explained in detail he said, "Oh yes. Oh yes. I have heard some of the new cars do not have clutches. Buicks, I think. Your brother-in-law did not have one installed in this Ford, did he?" When Roy explained Ford didn't make them he said, "I see. I'm sorry. How do I get started?"

Roy had a hard time keeping his mind on teaching the green kid. Luck had not been with him. A fat, grumpy man that he cared nothing about was sitting over in the bus. He was using his ten minute break to read a newspaper. Larry Thorpe had used his end-of-the-run break very differently up at River Terrace. Was it against City Transit rules for a driver to be seen sitting at the wheel reading a newspaper? Yes, the bus was parked, but it didn't look right.

Surely it would be against Transit rules to seduce an adolescent boy. Seduce. How had that word crept into his thoughts? It was supposed to refer to girls who had lost their virginity. What had he lost? And had he been seduced, or had he been the one who strung Thorpe along? Up until now he had prided himself in being clever enough to land such a handsome man. Now he was pouting out the word, seduce. It was going to be a bad day.

When Malcolm finally got the car moving he was worse than Roy had thought. Fox clashed the gears, he caused the wheels to spin by letting the clutch out too quickly. He bounced up

on the curb, then spun the wheel so violently in the other direction that he came within an inch of hitting the parked bus. Out of the corner of his eye Roy saw the driver drop his newspaper.

Roy did not trust him further than around the block, and at this he had to limit his driving to low gear for at least five round trips. Carefully he coached him to start, then go a few feet and stop, in hopes he would get the feel of the thing and relax. It was slow going. Malcolm held on to his tenseness as though it were part of him. Constantly he talked.

"I'm sorry to be so dense. Next time around the block I'll feel better. The steering wheel doesn't behave at all the way I thought it would. Are you sure it's tight enough? The brakes don't seem to stop the same all the time. Are you sure they are working right?" At least he was tenacious.

By the sixth turn around the block Roy managed to get into second gear. He took this as though it were a major triumph of muscular control. He breathed easier and began to sit up jauntily in his seat. By the eighth turn he was somewhat confident, and Roy had him drive out toward a country road where he actually put the motor into third gear. At first the new speed terrified Malcolm, and Roy was afraid they would flip into the ditch. But a mile or so down the road and he settled into a modicum of confidence, enough that he was able to turn the car around and head back home.

Roy breathed easier. This was certainly enough for a first lesson, and it looked as though they would get back without an accident.

But when they neared the Institute they saw a complication had developed. In this outlying area there had been few cars to bother them. Now one had parked at the curb directly in front of the residence house. It was in the exact spot where they had started out. Malcolm saw it a block away and said. "Should I drive up behind him? Is there room?"

Roy pointed out there was at least a half a block of room, and that it would be good practice to coast up behind the car and stop. Malcolm wanted to bring the car to halt right where he was and not trust himself to get so close to another vehicle, but Roy urged him on.

Fox did manage to come within twenty feet of the other automobile and within three feet of the curb. He turned the switch off and set the brake and leaned back to give a big, "Whew!", a self-congratulation that it was all over.

Then they saw that there were people in the front yard. Two batches of them. One group stood on the front porch of the residence. In fact the front door was open and the landlady was standing there, apron on, in the outer circle of the little bunch. Then off over by the hedge rows were two or three other people.

Suddenly, Roy noticed that Malcolm froze. He placed his hands back on the steering wheel and looked straight ahead. In a second it became clear what had frozen him. A familiar voice called out, "Why there he is now. Oh good God. He's driving a car!"

It was Aunt Vinnie breaking away from the knot of people on the front porch. Bursting into uncontrollable tears she advanced as far as the sidewalk and stood there wringing her

hands. You could tell she had tried to dress up for this occasion. And she looked much tidier than she had the night of Cliff's illness. Someone had tried to set her hair, and a few curls stuck out from her wide-brimmed straw hat which was decorated with white velvet ribbons. She wore a light tan street dress with white trimmings, but it did not fit her well. She had abandoned the guaraches, but the open-toed sandals she wore were only slightly more dressy. Probably corns and bunions plagued both her feet. There was no trace of gracefulness about her walk.

An imposing man, radiating self-confidence, plowed a course directly beside Vinnie Dollop. Only he did not stop at the sidewalk, and he certainly did not wring his hands. His small blue eyes looked straight at Malcolm as he came right up to the car and gripped the front window frame. Dressed in a gray pin-stripe suit with harmonizing gray shoes he looked about fifty years old. But his walk had a muscular spring to it, and there was no pot around his middle. As he passed by Vinnie he said in a steady, resonant voice, "I'll talk to him, Mrs. Dollop."

At the car he poked his face in the driver's window and said, "Hello, Malcolm. I'm Dean Rugger. I believe you're a student at our university this summer. Your aunt came to me with her problem. She had been worried sick about you. Don't you want to come home?"

Vinnie burst into a new tear-drenched wail. In a high, nervous voice she began addressing anyone who would listen to her. "He got into trouble last summer, too. A terrible mess, too terrible to tell. I'd be a lunatic to let him out of my

sight for a minute until he's old enough to get some sense in his head.. I had to rake up over a thousand dollars. There may be some more cost yet. The police were coming around every day for over a week. Yes, the police. It wasn't until they laid the law down to him that we could talk any sense into his head.

"He has made me so sick with worry, the worst I've been all my life. His mother made me his legal guardian in her will. I have to live with my sister, and she won't cooperate at all. She has no legal right to say a word at all--"

While her endless stream was going on the man in the gray suit tried to make himself friendly. He complimented Fox on doing so well at driving. He asked if this was his first lesson. "What a nice, clean looking car you are sitting in. Does it belong to this young man beside you?"

He looked Roy over closely. His voice sounded pleasant enough, but his eyes were very sharp. Again he introduced himself, again emphasizing his university title. "I'm Dean Rugger," he said stretching his thick arm all the way across the front seat to shake hands with Roy. When he got Roy's name he asked, "Do you stay here at these apartments? Oh, you live at River Terrace? Is this your parent's car?" And he would not stop asking questions until he got Roy's exact address and in whose name the automobile was registered.

Behind Vinnie the little knot of people were standing with eyes glued on the two boys. Most of them seemed to be roomers who lived in the complex. Apparently Vinnie had stirred up as big an audience as she could for the scene in which she was to recapture her ward. You could tell the people didn't

know what to make of this to-do, and one of them broke away and went back in the house as though he had heard enough.

The other knot of people, the one over at the side by the hedge rows, was breaking up too. Soon it was reduced to two people, one was Tolliver, and the other was a man who seemed to be a duplicate of Dean Rugger at least as far as importance and self assurance was concerned. Roy could not see his face, but it was easy to tell he was asking the same sort of prying questions the Dean was. Tolliver was responding by waving his hands excitedly and shaking his head.

At last Dean Rugger straightened up at the car window confident that everything was now under control. In his rich, deep voice he said, "I'll help you get your things, Malcolm."

Malcolm moved for the first time. Obediently he got out of the car and said, "Well".

Rugger put his hand on Fox's shoulder and said, "Everything's going to be alright now." As they advanced toward the hedge rows and the path leading to the rear apartments the Dean paused to toss a question back at Roy. "Can I be of any assistance to you, young fellow?" Roy said, no, and slipped across the cushion to the driver's seat.

While the party disappeared between the hedge rows to go to the apartment and get Malcolm's things Roy noticed that Winnie never got close to her ward. She always pranced about six feet away from him, wobbling clumsily on her bad feet. Tolliver brought up the rear. He was standing apart, nose in the air, indignant that he had been sucked into such a mess.

What a relief to drive the lord away from there and go home to River Terrace. Yet he couldn't help but feel sorry



for Malcolm. It had been a bad morning.

Back to River Terrace he found Blanche on the telephone. She was talking to Art Carnes and asking about Velma. "I've been trying to reach her the last three days," she said. "How are you two getting along?" There was a long pause while Blanche sat with her free elbow resting on the end table, her arm and hand curled up over her hair as though she were holding her own head. She was unaware of it, but it was a sad, uncomfortable pose. The conversation with Art was not going well. After several yes's and no's she said, "Has she made up her mind about her job yet?"

Blanche gave another long pause while she listened to Art. He seemed to be in a talkative mood, but he must have spoken all words and little content, because Blanche took her arm down from her head and nodded a greeting to Roy. As she saw her brother a faint smile came to her face.

Ever since Cliff had left she had been much happier to see Roy come home from work and to have him around the house. She no longer picked on him about little things, and she seemed happy to turn over the chores Cliff had done to her brother. Roy was now taking care of all the yard and vegetable garden. Things looked almost as green and grew almost as fast as they had under Skirvin's masterful hand. Blanche was proud that the place had not gone to shambles.

For the last week Blanche had tried taking up several hobbies to make her days pass quicker. None of them suited her. On Monday she had borrowed a neighbor's accordion and squeezed around with it a whole day. The thing made her nervous. She could not imagine why anyone would go through such long, rigor-

ous discipline just to play notes. The next morning she took it back to her neighbor. "I'm not musical," she said. "Take it back. It reminds me of when I was a kid and mama tried to force me to learn the piano. Take it back. I'll find something else to do."

On Wednesday she called up a woman who advertised in the paper that she had hand woven rugs for sale. Blanche carefully avoided committing herself to buying anything and strung the woman out to ask her about learning to weave. Wednesday afternoon, before her typing class, she drove down town to meet the woman. Back home that night she was again disgusted. "What a fiddling drudge. How can she stand to waste time like that?"

Thursday morning she was extremely restless. By now she realized she would not be content with her part-time job of teaching. She said she wanted a full, steady job, something that would keep her mind busy twenty-four hours a day.

And now it seemed she had heard of something, some lead about work. When she hung up the telephone she explained it to Roy--she was taking him into confidence about her private plans more and more every day.

"Last Wednesday I got Art on the phone and he told me Velma was thinking of quitting her job down at the employment bureau. Personally, I think she's absolutely crazy, but if that means there's an opening I can slip into I'll certainly try it, I'll bet she's let Art talk her into this. It was a bad thing when he was turned down from the service. If ever anyone was fitted for army life it's Art. And Velma would make one of the best officer's wives you ever saw. She would take to camp life better than any trooper that ever shouldered

a gun. It's idiotic for her to give up that high-paying job she's got. I'll bet she's pregnant. That would be just like Art to get her that way. He wouldn't hesitate to scare her into quitting her job months before she had to either. You'd never catch me giving up a good job like that. The trouble of it is I can't get Velma, herself, on the phone, and Art's as vague as mist when he wants to be. I felt sure I could reach her this Saturday morning, but, again, nothing but Art. I think she's trying to avoid me. I'm getting out of patience with her. The wonderful opportunity she's got, and throwing it away. It wouldn't hurt her to put in a plug for me to take her place, but I'll bet she won't. She's got her head set that I can't hold down a rough and tumble job like that. I know better. I can do it as well as she can. Oh well, I'm going down Monday and put in an application at Civil Service for that very job. I'll do what I can on my own."

She was so preoccupied with trying to reach Velma that she didn't bother to ask how Roy's adventure with the driving lesson had gone. If she wasn't on the phone she was busy preparing the noon meal. She had resolved to fix a first rate dinner, as good a one as if Cliff were at home. She must get out of the habit of throwing together a snack. It was not healthful, and it was sowing seeds of bad habits.

Around two o'clock she did manage to phone Velma. Again she sat in the sad pose of resting her elbow on the table and cupping her hand around her face. Her fingers diddled with her curls.

The conversation with Velma didn't go any better than the one with Art. Roy wondered if there had been a spat between the two households. Blanche kept trying to pin Velma down.

Did she, or did she not plan to quit her job. No definite answer. Blanche tried to pin her down as to just how she had landed that work in the first place. As slippery as quick-silver. "What would I have to go through if I wanted to work at something like that?" she asked, and from the frown on her face Roy could tell she was getting no satisfactory reply.

It was only when the conversation veered around to an entirely different subject that the two women began to talk freely. The different subject also interested Roy.

"--I wonder why she called you instead of me. She wasn't at my typing class last night. The first time she has missed. Did she tell why she wasn't there when she called you up this morning? I wonder if she is mad at me."

A pause, then Blanche continued. "--I hate to see her lose interest. The fact that she has two children should not scare her off from preparing herself for a job. I know one of them is spastic, but that's no excuse. If she wants to break free from household grind she can find a way. I'll try to talk to her, but I don't think it'll do any good."

Then there was another pause in which Velma must have been telling a long, involved story. It caused Blanche to frown, and she interrupted only with a few uh-huh's and mm's. Then she said, "He hasn't done it yet, has he? What do you mean she doesn't know? Isn't he at home this Saturday morning? He isn't? Well, was he at home last night? What is she worried about if he is not around a few hours Saturday morning?"

"I'm going to have to call her up. She gets so emotional about her husband. That's a shame that she's so wrapped up in him, because she's got more sense than anyone else in her

family. That Lilla gives me a pain. That coffeeshop of hers is going to flop. The worst thing Georgia could do is tucker down around her kinfolks.

"I'll bet her husband has just gone off some place. Maybe he works Saturday. How does she know he isn't at work? Who called up? Oh, someone from the bus company. And he hadn't reported in?

"Well, he's just gone off some where. I haven't any patience with women who throw a fit every time their men steps out of the house. All right, I'll try to call her up, but I don't want to stick my nose into a family squabble. By tonight it will all be blown over. Does she have any money in the house? Oh, he left her a little bit.

"Even if he does run off and join the Air Force it will turn out all right. I've never seen him, but I understand he's a big healthy man. Maybe the service will be just the thing for him. People are too prejudiced about the armed forces. We've got to get over the idea that anything in uniform is a bum. They've set up allowances for dependants, and she won't be left to starve even if he did join up. I may call her up. But I'd rather wait until she calls me first."

Blanche hardly bothered to elaborate on the phone call when she hung up. It was just woman's gossip in the neighborhood, a little drama happening to another housewife. In a case like that any woman would pitch in and help if anything could be done. But she wanted to be quite careful not to meddle.

Roy was also careful, extremely careful that he show no special interest in what might be going on in Pristine. In

an off-hand way he would if there had been any mail.

"I'll bet you can't guess who wrote," said Blanche. When Roy guessed Cliff she said, "Oh yes, he writes almost every day, but this letter is from Grass Prairie." Again Roy made the wrong guess--their father. She said, "Oh, his letter came Wednesday. It was like all his other letters--the weather is dry, and the wheat is fair, your loving Dad, Ted Grover. The letter that came this morning is from Mrs. Morris. No, don't get excited. She's not adding fuel to the fuss between Jane and Betty. I suppose the nursing home in Gloriona pretty well has that under control. The big news is Mr. and Mrs. Morris are coming to visit us in August. They may bring Monte with them if they can get an over grown adolescent boy to stay in their car long enough to make the trip.

"It'll be wonderful seeing the Morrisises again. You know Mrs. Morris is now a full-time secretary in her husband's office. I remember her having unlimited energy. I'm sure she's doing a splendid job--I was about to say a splendid job helping her husband. The truth is that woman knows as much law as her husband does. When I was working at their house she spent more time reading law books at night than he did. I think it's wonderful that she's formally spending all day in his office. It's doubly wonderful when you consider she hasn't kept a house-girl since I left. But I'll bet some way she manages to keep her house neat as a pin. It will be swell having them here in August. If only Cliff could be here to welcome them, but it seems there's no chance of his getting a leave any way soon."

She was hardly through telling about the Morrisises when the telephone rang again. Technically, it was a long distance

call, but only from Pristine. Blanche answered in a voice that showed more surprise than it should have.

"Why, hello, Georgia. Imagine hearing from you. Oh no, it was all right missing last night's class. Is anything the matter?"

A long pause followed while Blanche listened. Then in a voice that expressed true surprise she said, "Yes, he's right here. Of course he will talk to you."

A slight frown appeared on her face as she cupped her hand over the receiver. "Roy," she said. "It's Mrs. Thorpe. She wants to speak to you."

Roy fought to keep astonishment from showing on his face. He almost tripped and fell simply walking three steps across the rug to the phone. As he took the receiver his face felt hot. He must be blushing. Blanche's gaze was boring a hole in his eyes. When he said, "Hello," his voice had a high-pitched crack to it like a fourteen year old whose vocal chords are changing.

"Roy?" said a soft, strange voice. With this first word you could tell she had a southern drawl, one even thicker than what you hear around Fort Boomer. Her tone was not well supported as though she were having trouble controlling her diaphragm. "You don't know me," she continued, such a low, slow voice. "I'm Mrs. Thorpe. Larry's wife."

Roy's head began to swim. What kind of trap was he falling into? He was not even supposed to recognize the name, Larry Thorpe, and here she was introducing herself as his wife as though that would explain everything.

"--I'm calling about something that's not really any of

my business. You're going to say I'm butting my nose in. It's about your watch."

He did not trust himself to answer a single word. Above all he must not echo the word, 'watch', because his sister had stopped no more than six feet away. This call had surprised her so much she was not even pretending to be preoccupied with other duties. She stood in the middle of the floor, looking and listening.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"The note you left down at the City Transit office. When my husband didn't report in for work this morning they called me up to ask if he was still at home. I had to tell them he left early this morning. So they started asking question about where he might be, and they mentioned the note you had left in their office. Did you get your watch?"

"No, no, I didn't," he said. And he quickly added, "I think I must have lost it some where else."

"Some where else? You mean some where besides on my husband's bus?"

"I--I lost it at work," he said. "Either that or down at the employment office. I--I haven't seen it since the very first day I was here." Then he added innocently, "Did your husband drive a bus?"

"Yes," she said. "You described him perfectly when you went into the Transit office to ask about your Bulova. They give you his name. Did you contact him?"

"No. No, I had forgotten his name," he said. "Was your husband the driver with the broken mirror under the tree at Leon Jones's? I remember him now. And, Oh yes, for awhile I



did think I lost my watch on his bus, but I remember I had it on at the employment office. I must have dropped it there. Thank you for asking about it. I'll have to go by the City Transit and tell them not to worry about it any more. Thank you for calling."

And there, he had hung up before she had a chance to respond. Immediately Blanche asked him, "What is this about a watch?"

"That old thing I had the first day I was here. Do you remember?" No, she did not, and he had to make a long explanation about a fellow at the flour mill who gave it to him a year ago. He had dropped it and given it up as no good. But Roy tinkered with it and got it so it would run occasionally. Sometimes he wore it, and some times he left it in the house with his things.

Blanche became silent, a restless sort of silence, and she spent the rest of the afternoon attacking the dust and mote in her house.

But gossip about the Thorpe scandal was far from dying down. Shortly before supper the woman who had loaned Blanche the accordion dropped by supposedly to borrow the hedge trimmers, but actually to spill a sensational development she had heard. "My niece has a friend teaching school up at Kristine," she said. The story is all over town up there. A woman has been following that Harry Thorpe around. I can't get it clear what sort of woman. Some say she's an old drunk old enough to be his mother, and some say she's a little thing clerking at Woolworth. Any way he changed his route to get her out of his hair. Or at least that's the story they tell. It'll be something if he

ner off with a trick slicked out in a pretty dress and left that deformed child.

Blanche sat frowning throughout this story as though she didn't want to hear any more. Nevertheless, she kept plying the neighbor with questions to get what she hoped would be facts.

"A woman? Velma tells me he was supposed to have run off to join the air force."

"Oh, they had a big row Friday night. Some people in a church house a block away heard it. He threatened to pull out right then and there and join the Navy or something. She cooled off and talked him out of it. The next morning, that's this morning, he dressed in his Transit uniform as usual and left just like he was going to work. He never got there. You know he gets to his bus in a Model-A Ford and parks it near the terminal at the Deaf Institute. Georgia doesn't even know where their car is. She's left afoot."

"Could there be foul play?" Blanche asked.

"Well, it depends on what you call foul."

"It's six o'clock now. He's probably driving up to the front door of his house in that Model-A Ford at this moment. He just played hockey from work. He'll show up, and all this gossip will be for nothing," said Blanche.

But more developments soon turned up. Roy and Blanche were listening to the ten o'clock news cast when a visitor drove up. It was Eilla's brother-in-law, the one who had unsuccessfully tried to oust the new bus driver the day after Leon's death.

At first he came only as far as the cupola, and with exaggerated politeness asked for the "man of the house". Blanche

hardly know how to answer him since this man should know her husband was in the army. After several other dead-end beginnings he introduced himself as Frank Sparks. "He and my wife, Lois, are helping Lilla run the coffee shop. We're worried about Lilla's other sister, Georgia. Her man's gone off and left her--"

Blanche broke in to say, "Surely not. Mr. Thorpe is probably home by now."

"He ain't coming home," Sparks said. "There ain't no reason to think a man like that will ever come back. He's the kind that kissed his trusting little wife good-bye this morning with a lie on his lips. He strung her along, deceived her, made her think and hope that he was going to his job like a husband should. He's gone. It's all on account of evil habits.--"

Here he stammered over a word while he shot a quick glance at Roy. Blanche might not have seen the glance, but she began to fidget. She did not sympathize with approaches that relied on dramatic words, and she asked him what he meant.

"Cigarettes, booze, gambling, and worse than that," Frank said significantly. This time he paused longer, leaving a verbal vacuum. He had not yet left the cupola, but his eyes were taking in everything in the Skirvin living room as though he might be cataloging a list of iniquities. Blanche was supposed to fill in his verbal vacuum with another, 'what do you mean?' but she didn't call for it. She kept quiet.

Sparks was so worked up that he soon threw some light on what he meant by 'evil habits'. "Dope," he said. "Dope. That's got to be what Thorpe was mixed up in. We've got to realize there's

pushers and paddlers right here in River Terrace."

Blanche's quick reply showed her disgust. "Mr. Clarke, there can't be anything like that here. Go home and get a good night's sleep. Next morning it will all be blown over."

Ray was quiet while this was going on. But the story about George made him want to laugh. It was so obvious the man had dropped this "bomb" because there was a more powerful explosive preying on his mentality, one that he dared not investigate.

Did he even know what homosexuality was? Had he never run across it? Or had he touched on it some where and then sealed it from his mind? The fact that he did not name "women" in his list of perditions was also significant. He couldn't even discuss fornication. Or, more likely, anything related to sex might be edging too close to the bomb he had sealed out of his consciousness.

Blanche's sharp words caused him to stammer some more. Then he said, "I'll shut up if you say so. But I've got to ask this boy something. I'm not trying to butt in. I wouldn't ask a thing if Georgia wasn't in such bad shape. That man left her with only twenty-five dollars in the house. Twenty-five dollars with two little kids and one of them spastic. Why, it's hard enough for a widder woman to scrape by with a thousand dollars insurance policy. Georgia's got to scrape together everything she can.

"Mrs. Barnes was telling me this boy was down at the Deaf Institute this morning. That's right where Larry used to park his Model-A. Did this boy see a Model-Ford parked around there any where? If Thorpe left it where we can get to it,

"I've got to get my hands on it before something happens to it in the middle of the night."

Roy spoke up and said, "No, I didn't see a Model-A any where out there."

"Did you see anything of Thorpe?"

"No."

"Now, young man, you know who I mean. I'm talking about Georgia's husband, the one who drove the bus. You know who I mean because Lilla saw you and him fiddling around with the mirror the morning before Leon died. You came back a day or two later asking about him. Georgia's got to get that car back if there's any way to do it. Twenty-five dollars, and her with a spastic kid."

No, Roy said he had not seen anything of Thorpe. He added he had not seen him since the morning of Leon's death, which was a true statement if not a complete one.

"Well," Sparks said, "If you saw nothing, you saw nothing. There's no telling what people will do when they start swilling coke and aspirin and things like that. Why I saw that Thorpe with a bottle of Coca Cola in his hand nearly all the time. He couldn't hardly drive his bus without sucking on the stuff, and he put them aspirins in it too. Poor Georgia. No telling what she's in for."

He left explaining he would have to spend all night if necessary tracking down that car. When he was gone Blanche huffed in irritation. "Coke and aspirin. Is that what he was calling dope?" She began to twist at her hair. Then she stopped it to scratch her ears. She stopped that to put her hands over her face and press her fingers against her eyes. "Let's call it

a night," she said. "I'm tired hearing about Georgia."

Next morning Blanche wanted to reminisce about Calabrese. While she was poaching eggs for their Sunday morning breakfast she asked Roy if he remembered the incubator Mama had bought so they could go into the chicken business. Roy was not sure he could. He only had a hazy recollection about something in a smoke house that smelled so funny. "It was the eggs scorching," Blanche said. "The contraption never worked. It over heated. Not a single chicken hatched. Poor Mama. So many of her plans went wrong."

Blanche's own eggs were not through poaching before Velma Carnes knocked on the front door. "Oh Velma," Blanche said, "you drove up so silently we didn't know anyone was at the door."

A satisfied look on Mrs. Carnes's face caused Blanche to glance passed her to the street. "A new car. That's why we didn't hear you. You've got a new car. What kind is it?"

Indeed there was a new one parked at the curb, a Pontiac, one of the more expensive models in a burnished-bronze color. Something was in the car. Two little heads barely stuck up as high as the backseat window. As soon as Blanche noticed them she said, "Oh."

Velma didn't bother to elaborate on the new Pontiac. She passed that up as though it were too common place a thing to discuss. Especially since she had been out bright and early on a mission of mercy.

"I've been out at Kristine," she said. "I thought about Georgia all night long, and when Art and I woke up I told him, 'I'm going out to see her. You can fix your own breakfast.' When I got out to her house she was pacing the floor, looking

out the window every few seconds thinking her husband would drive up. I told her right then and there she was going to have to snap out of it. I got Lilla on the phone and told her to get out there and drive her sister around all day to get her mind off of things. I really gave her a scare, and she was out in ten minutes.

"That man Sparks found the Model-A last night. Roy, didn't you go behind the Deaf Institute at all? It was parked by the service entrance between two garbage cans. Thorpe had unsnapped the registration certificate from the steering wheel and placed it face up in the middle of the front seat. On the line where it said 'owner' he had crossed out 'Mr. Larry Thorpe', and had written in 'Mrs. Georgia Thorpe'. And that woman still thinks her husband is coming back to her.

"Well, Lilla promised to spend the whole day with her down at the zoo. I bundled up the two kids and will take care of them while their mother is getting the cobwebs out of her brain."

No one could have told this story in a more matter-of-fact way than Belma. Her calm tone implied that, for her, handling two strange children for a day would be a snap, and snatching a distraught woman from the jaws of crisis was a routine chore for one so skilled in handling human problems as she. The therapeutic value of a day at the zoo would straighten Georgia out, and next week she could go on her way a reformed woman.

Therefore, she announced, she had dropped by to talk about something else. "Roy," she said, stepping into the front room and settling down on theavenport. "How are you and the chits getting along?"

Something about her manner loosened people up. Or perhaps Roy was relieved that they were no longer talking about the Kristine tragedy. He became expansive and said he had the chit job down fine. He and nearly Cates were getting along swell.

"Good," said Velma. "I think you'll be just the right one to help Art next Friday night. The 'possum hunt."

Roy had not heard of the 'possum hunt. So in a few words Mrs. Carnes enlightened him. "Art does it for the Boy Scouts every summer. This year they're going a way out on the river, about five miles north of the lake. Art's got seventeen little Cub Scouts lined up. Seventeen kids, two other grown men and three 'possum hounds. Even if he squeezes five boys to a hound that's going to leave two little squirts a fifth wheel on a wagon. Some more of the little devils will drop out before the hunt is over. Following hounds through under brush sounds good until you try it. Art says he needs a smart boy about your age to keep an eye on the drop-outs. Why don't you come with them?"

Roy found himself promising Mrs. Carnes he would go along at the very time he was realizing this was a thankless task, a fifth wheel taking care of the other fifth wheels. But a night with the hounds might be fun, certainly more fun than sitting at home listening to more gossip about the Thorpe scandal. Yes, he would go.

"I knew you would," said Velma, and she reeled off the time and place he should meet the troops. She arose from theavenport, brushed off her skirt and said, "Now, back to the two little kids. They're dirty as heck. I think I'll blow up



a couple of inner tubes and let them splash around in Messingill's horse trough. Oh, don't worry. I'll put water wings on that little spastic one. I'll bet no one has ever thought of floating her in water."

At the door she turned around and asked, "Boy, when you ride the bus to work, do you ever see a girl, about twenty. Sometimes she wears a white dress with frills and lace trailing around the top and bottom?"

Mrs. Carnes had caught him off guard. He had been very relieved that they were no longer talking about the scandal, and its re-introduction aroused a flash of betraying expression on his face. Of course there was such a girl, a regular commuter each work-day morning. But he had paid no attention to her. She could have nothing to do with Thorpe. He would lie and say, no.

"I can see by your face that you have," she said. "Tomorrow, when you go to work will you do me a favor and see if she is still riding the bus? Lois Sparks thinks Larry has run off with a woman, maybe the girl with the frills. Zilla and Frank don't think so. Any way, if this little chick goes to work in the morning it will knock that theory in the head."

When she had left Blanche rushed back into the kitchen. "Oh, we've let the eggs burn completely up. I wish Velma had never come by. A new car. How can they afford a new car? I think I'm the one that needs to go to the zoo and get my mind off of things."

Sunday night Mrs. Carnes called up to say the children had done famously under her care. She had got the little boy to swim a stroke or two. Unfortunately the little girl had not done as well as she had hoped. Apparently, the little thing

was completely unable to accordin te her muscles and would never swim. However, Velma swore that under her coaching the creature had lost fear of the water. The day had been rewarding in other respects too. When she took the children bac to Iristine Lilla had just returned with their mother. Georgie now looked much more composed.

"She's like a setting hen," Velma said. "When you jerk eggs out from under her she has fits for a few days. After that she gets over it. Georgie will be all right."

Monday morning the girl who wore fluffy clothes and flirted with soldiers was waiting for the bus at the transformer station. She had on a necklace of glass balls that looked like light bulbs screwed into gold plated sockets. She was still trying to flirt with the same soldier who had been with the group under the locust tree the morning after Leon's death.

When Roy telephoned this fact to Mrs. Carnes Monday night she replied. "Oh, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter whether he ran off with that particular girl or whether he ran off because he had itchy feet. He has left. Sparks has been using up big hunks of Leon's money telephoning today. About noon he got a lead on the missing man. Saturday morning Thorpe caught a ride with a teacher at the Deaf Institute and rode all the way to San Antonio with him. Sparks got hot on the phone and talked with all the recruiting offices in San Antonio. He was about six hours too late. Early this morning Thorpe joined the Air Force. His wife and kids will get dependent's allowance. Money will be flowing into the Iristine household before the month is over. Georgie won't starve, but it sure looks like her husband has left her. As far as I am concerned

the scandal is over. How many chits did you rack up today?"

Blanche found applying for a civil service job tedious. Monday she got no further than filling out some forms. However, on Tuesday she got a call from the down town office of her business college. Why would she want to leave them? They could give her a full-time teaching job in their main school. So Thursday she started to work on a nine-to-five teaching job in the heart of the city.

She was afraid driving the Ford to and from work would make her nervous. With her cautious steering it would take almost an hour each way. Yet the college was on an off street, five blocks from the bus line. The practical thing for her to do was drive even though it meant she would not get home before six.

Roy's hours were such that he would beat her to River Terrace by thirty minutes. So Thursday when he came home from work he found himself alone in the house for a half hour.

He realized that all week he had been thinking about Larry Thorpe. Now he must spend some time to try to figure things out. What were his chances? Above all he must look at the situation objectively and not wish himself into unlikely hopes.

Could he possibly get a letter from Larry Thorpe? Or was he only hoping he might now that he would be the first to take the letters out of the mail box and would have a half hour to read them in privacy?

The fact that Thorpe had joined the Air Force meant he had found a semi-honorable way to escape from a burdensome marriage. This meant Thorpe must be basically an honorable

man, not the type to take twenty-five dollars, skip out, and sled a nagging lover as well as a nagging wife.

But taking an objective point of view meant Roy must also analyze his reasons for sending him this money. Did he do it with no strings attached? If so it was wrong of him to expect a letter. Or did he put the letter in an untraceable envelope only as a gesture knowing full-well Thorpe could figure out who sent it? If such was the case he must admit he was trying to back Thorpe in a corner. It looked like Thorpe was not the type who liked being backed into corners. Larry would never write, would never contact him.

There was an off chance Thorpe didn't know about the twenty-five dollars. Georgia might have opened the letter, kept the money, raised a row with her husband that night over some entirely different matter, and was now pretending he had given it her as a parting pittance.

Was Georgia that smart? She was smart enough that she was on to Roy's trail. How much did she know? What had her husband told her in the Friday night row? Would she forget about the little Grover boy, or was there more trouble in the future?

Looking at it from another side you would not expect Georgia to be that cunning. When she found the money the next thing she did was flaunt it in her husband's face. The confrontation got out of hand, and she found herself deserted.

Then why hadn't Larry contacted Roy by now? The man must have spent a long, lonely weekend down in San Antonio waiting for the recruiting office to open up Monday morning. If he really cared about Roy he would have phoned him, sent a message

by a friend, or a cryptic letter that only Roy would understand.

Ah, but on the other hand, thirty-year-old Thorpe would not care that much about an adolescent that he had seen only once. To him their encounter was only a blow-job. When he found out about the twenty-five dollars he must have been madder than hell and decided he would use it as a means to finance his escape from wife and kids and the love-sick adolescent both.

Love-sick. What a stupid situation to be in. If he had any sense at all he would forget Larry Thorpe. If he didn't he would get himself into a tangle he would regret.

Blanche was home and telling about her first day of teaching.

Friday, the time of day people in Fort Boomer were beginning to call "afternoon". Roy was riding the bus home from work, and as he neared River Terrace he heard a woman say something about a house burned down. It was only a voice coming from the seat behind, not worth paying attention to. At the transformer he glanced up the highway and noticed the River Terrace Coffe Shop seemed deserted. When he walked by it he could read a sign on the door, "Closed for emergency".

Once home he must hurry to get dressed for the 'possum hunt. The troop of Cubs were to load up in a truck in front of Carnes's house at six o'clock, a very early hour to hunt nocturnal animals. But this outing was more to develop the character of seventeen boys than it was to bring in game, so numerous adjustments must be made.

Who was contributing the open-bed grain truck Roy did not know. Doug Elmore, one of the three chaperons, had borrowed

it some where. Since the youngsters would be boisterous at the beginning of their outing it was thought risky to leave after dark. In broad daylight there would be less chance that one would fall off. Yes, they would be coming back in the wee hours of the morning, but then they would be tired and groggy with sleep.

Also, they wanted to get both boys and dogs, especially the dogs, to the river bottom plot where the hunt should take place before night fall. The chaperons would turn them loose, let them rip around and blow off steam. This would serve two purposes. The scatter brained ones who had no real interest in 'possum hunting would tire themselves out. They would be bedded down in the truck where they would sleep off the whole thing. The dogs during the romp would scare up any poisonous snakes that might be lurking in the area. Then the brushy forty acres would be safer when the real hunt took place.

Just who owned the tract Roy did not know, except that it must be a civic minded farmer interested in the character of the future generation. Carnes explained the place had several attractions for Cub Scout 'possum hunts, reasons why the boys had been going there for several years. Back in 'thirty-three a grass fire had broken loose in the area. The worst under brush from farm house to river had been singed off, but big trees where 'possums hung out were left alive and flourishing. So now there was nothing especially hazardous to youngsters inside the forty acres. The river itself flowed peacefully on the other side of the tract's fence. The boys had been told not to cross any fences no matter how many 'possums jiggled from limbs on the other side. So none of the kids would stumble

into the river and drown.

Were they likely to find any 'possums there? Yes, a fair chance of bagging at least one. Reverend Gallagher, the third chaperon, had promised to leave his parsonage up at Pristine early Friday, go out to the forty acres where the farmer had a live 'possum staked out, and the two would turn it loose in a likely tree in the middle of the forty acres. If it didn't head back to familiar territory it would probably still be there tonight. Also, a few of the marsupials might naturally live in the fenced-in area. Boys and dogs could run across them too. At any rate the kids could say they had been on a 'possum hunt, and they would blow off a lot of steam.

Roy had scarcely reached home when he heard news of the hunt. He was only as far as the lawn when he heard the telephone ring inside the house. Rushing in to scoop up the receiver he heard Mr. Carnes's excited voice say, "Roy. Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for thirty minutes. Isn't anybody ever at home at your place?"

Grover explained that he had just gotten in from work and wondered why Art wasn't doing the same thing. Carnes threw back the answer, "I got off an hour early today. Listen. Things are all balled up over here. Gallagher's been tied up all day long. Never had a chance to go to the farm and stake out a 'possum. May not even get to come with his dogs tonight. Some of the little devils have showed up early. Come over and bat some flies for them. Keep them out of mischief. Get over here in ten minutes."

Quickly Roy scribbled a note for Blanche explaining where he was going, and in about twelve minutes he arrived at Carnes's

impressive residence. No grain truck was there yet, but three cars were parked at the curb, and two little boys were fighting on the sidewalk. Three others were splitting through a flower bed in a spirited race around the house. Another one was bouncing a tennis ball against a window shutter.

Carnes rushed out his front door a baseball and bat in his hand. "You're late," he said. "Get these kids out on the vacant lot. Bat some flies. Break up those fist fights. Keep them busy. It's up to you. I've got a million loose ends to tie up."

It was hard to believe this was the same man who had carried Cliff to the hospital with such cheerful calmness. Evidently a disrupted Scout party was more unnerving than a medical emergency. His charm and Southern manners were all gone, and he was striking out blindly at the forces of frustration. At least he could make Skirvin's brother-in-law jump lively.

Carnes rushed toward one of the parked cars hoping to make a quick get-away. He didn't. As Roy grabbed at the ball and bat Velma appeared at the door.

"Art," she yelled. "Get back here in forty-five minutes. I can't hold things together longer than that. Be sensible and call this shindig off."

"No," said Art, who got in his car and zoomed off.

Mrs. Carnes turned her irritation toward the boys. "You little dickenses. Get out of those flower beds. Roy get them out of the yard. I'm sick and tired of so much to-do over a fool 'possum hunt. If it doesn't come off the sky won't fall in." Angrily she clapped her hands together. "Out, you little devils. Out of my zinnias."



With much chasing and coaxing Roy got seven little boys to a vacant lot behind the house. One of them stood out from the others. They called him James, and although he was not very large he had a wiry spring to his step which kept him a good three paces ahead of the rest.. As Grover tossed up the ball to hit his first fly James blurted out. "Aw, I'll bet he can't even hit it. Stand close men.. This is going to be easy."

Thus James got his "men" to rush up close. He, himself, kept a middle distance, and Roy's first fly fell right into his hands. One up for James. The next one went further, but James had adjusted his spacing, and it, too, went into his hands. Two for James. Another one and the bat would be his.

As Roy was flexing his muscles for this final test Carnes's voice sailed out from the back porch, "Keep them busy, Grover. Keep them from fighting. Knock some long ones, that's what they want.. I'll be back later."

The kids were yelling, "A long one. Come on. I'll bet you can't do it."

Fortunately he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. A man was sauntering around the side of the Carnes house and slowly inching through the back picket fence to the vacant lot. "Hello," he called. "You're Grover, ain't you? I'm Elmore." He giggled, at what Roy could not tell. Giggles seemed to bubble up from his chest without cause. "Some goings-ons here, ain't they? It's somethin' to see Carnes all boiled up, ain't it? That woman out in Pristine's got a chigger in his pants, ain't she? You want me to bat those flies fer you?"

Grover willingly handed him the ball. The kids immediately

scattered back to the edge of the lot. Elmore gracefully tossed up the ball and gave it a beautiful swat that sent it spanning elegantly far out over the lot, across the gravelled ruts of the little used back street, and it popped to rest on the edge of the vacant hinter-land beyond. It was the batter's game again.

All the kids were silent, including James. During the following swats Roy eased out amongst the boys to get acquainted. One of them was a ready talker, and Grover asked him what had happened.

"That woman's house burnt down."

What woman? "Miz Thorpe." What did that have to do with Carnes? "It ain't so much Carnes. It's the preacher. He's got the dogs. No dogs, no hunt. And Miz Thorpe's been keepin' the preacher busy all day long crying on his shoulder. It may knock the whole trip in the head."

The kid paused in awe as one of Elmore's majestic flies arched over head. Time was passing quickly. The sun was edging toward the western horizon.

Velma's high voice called out from her kitchen window. "Alright kids. Sandwiches."

The ball game broke up instantly, and every boy made a dash for Carnes's kitchen. There, spread out on the cabinet were rows and rows of sandwiches, bananas, pecan brittle and watermelon. However, all of the other ten boys had arrived, and five of them got ahead of the seven who had played ball. Food vanished. A few mothers had showed up and were peeking in the kitchen door to smile at the youngsters. Blanche was there too, busily helping Velma replenish the gaping holes

in the spread of food.

It was easy to pick up more news of the fire. All the mothers were talking about it. "Terrible," one said. But another said, "Carelessness." "Whatever it is," said a third, "We've got to get these boys off. "The whole world can't stop for that."

As soon as Blanche got a break from her sandwich duty she, too, talked about the fire. "What next," she said. "What can Georgia get to happen to her next? They say it was an oil stove explosion while she was fixing breakfast. I didn't know anyone around here was still cooking on an oil stove. God knows there's plenty of natural gas out in Pristine. And I didn't know oil stoves blew up unless you let one leak all over the floor. On top of that she must have lost her head because she didn't get a thing out of the house but her two kids. And she barely managed to drag them out.

"The silly part of it is she refuses to leave Pristine. She won't even come down to River Terrace and spend a few days with Lilla. She says she will sleep in the street before she will leave her home town. Mr. Gallagher, the preacher out there, has been working all day gathering donations to help her out. He's also been trying to contact the husband who's flown the coop. Someone said he got in contact with him down at San Antonio.

"I suppose she'll have to stay in the parsonage tonight. Personally, I'm tired of hearing about Georgia's problems. It looks like she could have been more careful about the stove she cooks on."

Mrs. Carnes had edged away from the crowd, and she also

put in her opinion. "If you ask me enough is enough. Georgia has cut big enough shine. It's time she looked at life sensibly. The thing for her to do is finish learning to type and get a job. She's got plenty of relatives to take care of her kids.

"I'm also disgusted with that husband of mine. You would think the pillars of the universe would collapse if this 'possum hunt didn't come off. It's so simple. Get some dogs, any dogs. Turn them loose out in the woods with the boys for an hour or two. Let the little devils run some spizerinktum out. Before you know it they'll be ready to come home, and they'll never know the difference. There's no need to throw a hissy over a bloomin' 'possum hunt."

An uneasy feeling, one with a double edge, gripped Roy. The thought of all of one's personal belongings going up in smoke was frightening. It was especially frightening because this had happened to Thorpe. It meant every little keepsake the man had saved from childhood was now reduced to blowing ashes. It was doubly bad because Larry could not have taken any great amount with him when he broke away last Saturday morning. For some reason getting away had been so important that he had risked leaving everything behind. Now it had gone up in smoke.

The other thing that bothered him was the sentence Blanche had dropped as an after thought--she had heard that the parson had contacted Thorpe down in San Antonio. Would Georgia be able to throw big enough fit to get her husband back? Could she find some way to make him return even from Uncle Sam? Roy now realized that for a whole week he had been feeling triumphant.

The twenty-five dollars he had gambled had not brought Thorpe to him, but it had gotten him away from his wife. For a whole week he had been thinking about that. It looked like he had laid on the straw that had broken the camel's back, and Thorpe had freed himself. It should be only a matter of time before Larry would contact the friend who had made it possible. Even if he did not the way was open for Roy to contact him.

But now all his gains might be wiped out. Georgia was working faster and harder than he was. Burning a house down showed more desperation than mailing twenty-five dollars. Things didn't look too good. Not only did Georgia have the law on her side, but she had the preacher, her relatives and all the people in Pristine and River Terrace pulling for her.

He must be very careful. Under no conditions could he show his feelings. In no way must he be connected with the Thorpe mess. Certain people, such as Zilla and Frank Sparks, might be watching his every move, even the faint ones that caused expression to show on his face. He must have iron control.

Someone yelled, "There he is, and he's got a truck. Why, he's got the preacher's dogs too!"

Yes, Art had driven a big grain truck to a stop in front of his house. Its flat bed was enclosed with high sideboards, plenty safe for pre-adolescent boys. Between the openings in the sideboards you could see three noses from three flop-eared, black and tan hounds. It was clear just any dogs was not good enough for Art. Miraculously he had saved almost all of his well-laid plans. The sun was still an hour high. Roy was here. Elmore was here. A truck, three dogs and seventeen boys were here. All they needed was one more chaperon and their outing

could come off just as he had planned it.

As soon as the kids heard Art honk the truck horn they grabbed the most available bits of food and rushed outside. The dogs fascinated them, something Carnes had foreseen, and since he didn't want their hunting instincts side tracked by boyish affection he kept them tethered to the sideboards. He assigned Roy the job of seeing that they stayed tethered until they could get under way.

"Old Gallagher thinks I'll never get his dogs to hunt," he said in a low aside, "but I know that preacher's secrets. He keeps those dogs thinking about two things, their master and hunting. He doesn't let any strangers mess around them at all. So you ride here in the back and make the boys leave the hounds alone."

A tough assignment, but not an impossible one. Carnes was showing the metal he was made of. Other Scout leaders might waste a quarter of an hour just getting his boys on a truck, but Art did it in thirty seconds. He used the fake departure trick. When three kids were on the truck he put the thing in gear and pretended he was driving off. Fourteen boys made a frantic rush to get on, and Carnes braked the motor just long enough to let them do it.

Then they were speeding through streets in strange suburbs. Roy, holding on to the hounds, could tell they were heading in a westerly direction and skirting far out beyond the new Air Force installations to the area where Lake Boomer melted into Boomer River. Suddenly they turned into a street of new houses, a strange situation. On all sides of them was open farm land, but this one development had three blocks of

paved street and a house on every lot.

Roy guessed they were about to pick up the third chaperon. That was the one thing they were lacking, and if Carnes had planned a trip with three adults in charge they would have three.

The truck pulled up in front of what must have been a brand new house. Its front yard was divided by a cement sidewalk of a dark blue color indicating it was scarcely dry. But no green lawn stretched on either side, instead were unsodded expanses of field weeds and stickers.. You could barely see the cement foundation around the bottom of the house. It, too, had that new, blue color, but the walls and roof had been "antiqued".. Rough, old-looking brick rose up as far as the gables where a pattern of yellow stucco and brown lath battens took over. On the roof asphalt shingles, vaguely imitating thatch, curved around the eaves.. The casement windows were paned with green bottle glass held together with irregular lead mullions. To residents of Texas it looked like something transported from Tudor England, although Queen Elizabeth would surely have been startled into hiccups.

In the new driveway stood a new Packard with a fresh windshield sticker that would get the driver passed the sentry at the Air Base. Roy guessed they were in one of the additions being built to house the skeleton crew of officers just now moving into the finished sectors of the new military installation.

One of the officers was standing in the doorway with his wife.

How could you tell he was an officer since he was dressed in gray slacks and green sport shirt? That was easy. Nothing

like him had ever been raised in Texas. He wore a moustache. It was also pale blonde and neatly trimmed although not quite sheared down to the pencil-line style. The stubble was long enough to show a part where the upper lip dipped into a fold.

About five years ago his physique must have been perfection, an example of fitness in full bloom. But now he was about ten pounds over weight. A slight bulge showed both above and below his belt. His smile, which you could see all the way to the curb, was almost as captivating as Roosevelt's, and his movements showed the quickness of perfect reflexes. A good guess would put him around seven or eight years older than Carnes and Elmore, but his natural vitality made up for the difference in age. He would belong any where.

His wife was as winning as he was. She was a cute little thing cuddled up at his side, and she waved vivaciously at the boys in the truck. Her small chin was tilted up which caused her auburn hair to flow back over her shoulders. Brown eyes, peaches and cream complexion and perfect breasts. She kept her perfect legs becomingly close together, and she wore white shoes and a white dress.

She was still waving when Carnes stuck his head out of the cab window and hissed a low-voiced warning to the boys in the back. "This is a nice neighborhood, you kids. No dirty words. And let's cut out that whooping and hollering. Roy, keep the lid on them. I don't want to have to go home and tell someone's parents their boy said bad words in a place like this."

The officer had kissed his wife good-bye and was advancing snappily toward the truck when James ripped out the word, "Shit", in a subdued voice that reached all the boys, but might



might not have carried as far as Carnes. At this point Roy realized he had been too preoccupied looking over this phenomenal man, because James had gotten too close to the dogs without his noticing it. That might have had something to do with his saying, "shit". Suddenly the hounds were quite restless, and one of them had, indeed, shit.

Several things happened at once. The blonde moustache was within ten feet of the truck when his wife called out, "Oh, Chuck, you've forgotten your chigger spray." She was waving one hand in an excited signal and using the other to open the door, supposedly to go in and get whatever chigger spray could be. As soon as she budged open their medieval door a large gray dog shot out like a coil spring. In a streak he passed her skirts, the weedy yard, the truck, the pavement, and disappeared behind the house across the street.

The house opposite must have been built a few days before the English manor, because someone had had time to seed a lawn. They were now sprinkling it with a weird looking spray. Some amateur sculptor had modeled a plaster cowboy and embedded the guts of a sprinkler inside. What should have been a lariat was a spray of water doing off-orbit loops over the dusty soil. To get behind the house the large gray dog upset the cowboy so the spray burried into the sand and shot up a stream of mud.

We must pause to tally up the unusual things that had been displayed in front of the boys. First, there was the new housing addition suddenly arisen from the prairies. No local person had dreamed things could be built and occupied so quickly. But here it was. The English style house has already been mentioned as well as the sight of a virile man wearing a moustache.

The wife had called him a strange name, "Chuck". Was that a nickname? Could it have something to do with Charley? And that large gray dog. Most of the boys had seen pictures of animals like that and knew it was a poodle. But who could dream that right here at home you would run across one, complete with top-knot and frills around the tail and knees.

Also, at least to some of the boys, there was the unusual behavior of a dog paying no attention to a truck full of boys and hounds and rushing to something unknown behind a neighbor's house.

More things happened. The officer had made a lunge to catch the dog as it sped by but missed by a yard. Just then one of the preacher's hounds broke loose, all three were males, and Roy realized he had either gnawed his way free or someone had yanked loose the tether hook from the rope. This dog also streaked across the pavement and disappeared behind the opposite house.

The officer swore, "Son of a bitch," the taboo word in this neighborhood, and muttered something about the Chistianson's dog being in heat.

"In heat?" yelled Carnes, and sprang from the cab. "Roy, boys get after that loose dog. We'll never catch 'possums if one of them smells a dog in heat."

The boys jumped off the truck in an instant. With a whoop they splattered across the newly planted lawn to get to what was behind the Christianson house. The cowboy speckled most of them with mud as they flew by. A window flipped up, and a harsh voice called out, "Here, here, here. Stop that!"

Roy was slow and had no more than jumped off the truck

when he found Elmore was tugging at his arm, winking at him and whispering in a mysterious voice. "Hey, Roy. Let's play a good prank on old Art. Turn those other two hounds loose. Let's see how good a hunter he turns out to be when his dogs has been smelling a bitch, and when he ain't got no 'possum fur for them to get started on, and especially when he didn't git a chanst to plant a real live one on the forty acres. Sneak back up on that truck and turn them loose. Go on."

Roy wouldn't have done it except that Elmore had such a good natured twinkle in his eye, and both Carnes and the officer both were now well out of ear shot. Carnes had followed the boys behind the Christianson house, and the officer had stopped to set right the cowboy. He was getting good and wet doing so. Also his pretty wife had chased after the dog so she was now at the truck and had overheard the tail end of Elmore's plot.

"Plant? What do you mean plant?" she asked. Her red mouth was open in astonishment, and her beautiful hazel eyes were bright with eagerness to get in on the prank. "You mean these kids aren't really going to hunt anything? They're just going to find what's already there?"

Elmore quickly whispered that Carnes had intended something like that but hadn't got a chance to go to the farmer's house and get the pet 'possum from his cage.

He laughed out loud. "Turn those other two loose. It'll serve him right."

Roy unhooked the other two dogs who shot away like rockets. They reached the back of the Christianson house just as Carnes came around the corner dragging by the collar the first hound who had gotten loose. When he saw two others lunging toward

him. "Oh, goddamn."

It was a real scramble before they had the three hounds back on the truck, the poodle back in the house, and the boys more or less reloaded.

Carnes shot dirty glances toward Roy at every opportunity. Of course he had to take time out to apologize to Mr. Christian-son across the street who turned out to be Colonel Christianson. who came to the door in full uniform.

The blonde moustache was enjoying the whole thing. His wife quickly whispered why they had turned the dogs loose. He broke out laughing and gave Roy special scrutinization. "Did you do that on purpose?" Then he laughed some more and turned toward the boys, "Men," he said. "Did you see those dogs take off? Well, men, that's what a female will do to you. In a few years you'll be following the same scent." The kids loved him for it.

Carnes stomped back to the truck. The sun was almost to the horizon. The dogs were snapping nervously at their leashes. Fate had not let Art win out over a whole day of bad luck. In spite of his super human efforts it looked like his plans were doomed to flop.

At this point the blonde moustache glanced at his clothes which were splattered here and there with mud. His wife exclaimed, "Oh, look at that. You'll have to go back inside and change."

Carnes lost all sense of diplomacy and blurted out, "There's no time to change. Let's get going." And he climbed into the cab and started the motor.

"Oh, no time?" asked the moustache calmly. "By the way,

I haven't introduced myself," he said with a hand stretched out toward Elmore. "I'm Captain Charles Sykes."

Art had started and was racing the truck motor. This tactic had gotten the boys loaded in a hurry, but it was not going to work so well with Captain Charles Sykes. Chuck paid not attention to the hint. Instead he put his hands on his hips and looked the situation over. With head tilted back he eyed the grain truck as though he were comparing it with all vehicles classed as trucks which he had ever seen in his life. You could tell he ~~had~~ seen better ones. Casually he turned to look the kids over, probably not to compare them with the kids back in his home, but to see if they belonged to the animal or plant kingdom. The dogs caught his attention. His eyes narrowed to slits and his mouth puckered over to one side as he examined them. It was doubtful if he was ~~judging their merits~~ as scent hounds; more likely he wanted to see if they were going to sprout horns, ring bells or blow up. You didn't have to be a detective to guess Sykes had never been in this part of the United States before, and what he saw here did not overly impress him.

Suddenly, he broke out of his study to introduce himself to Roy. It was a strange introduction, very short, a quick hard handclasp, then he forgot Roy to continue his examination. Such behavior was especially strange, because Roy was sure this man had given him two meaningful side glances before. But instead of a follow up the Captain was now dismissing him cold. He was staring at Art and the racing motor. Judging from the look on his face he did not like men who impatiently raced motors. Abruptly he said, "If there isn't time to let a muddy son of a bitch

like me change clothes then I'll ride in the back." With marvelous muscular reflexes he jumped up on the truck bed, stalked toward the cab and stood spraddle legged amidst the dogs. But the hounds were restless, and one of them snapped at his pants leg. Such insubordination the Captain would not tolerate. Swat. He slapped the cheeky dog on the muzzle. The dog cringed and drew back as if to bite, but thought better of it.

The boys were delighted that a genuine Air Force Captain, one obviously imported from another part of the United States, had chosen to ride with them. Art, of course, already had the truck moving, but all seventeen youngsters plus Roy managed to pile on.

At this point Grover didn't know if he was as delighted as the boys that Sykes was riding with them. What did he think of this creature? Anyone could see that he had oodles of charm. Every inch of him was intensely alive, and in spite of a tendency to get pudgy he was a sleek, hair-triggered athlete. But anyone could also see that if he charmed easily he could repel even quicker. In an instant he had flared into a pout and refused to ride in the cab with Art. Carnes must be smoldering with indignation right now. Impetuous flouncing like this, especially in front of kids, made Roy uneasy.

Yet, there could be a double meaning in Sykes's deciding to ride in the truck bed, a whim that had nothing to do with muddy clothes or racing motors. Roy detected a familiar pattern. A man gives him a knowing stare. Some folderol goes on to throw other people off the scent. The man arranges to get Roy by himself. Of course they were not now alone. They were with seventeen kids. But it would be possible for the Captain to make

advances that would shoot over the boys' heads, and the pattern would be following its usual outline.

But Roy was not sure he wanted events to follow an outline. Another affair right now seemed completely wrong.. No doubt about it he was infatuated with Thorpe, perhaps madly in love with him, and to flirt with another man at this moment would be the cruelest sort of infidelity.

But cruel? To whom? Thorpe was gone, perhaps never to return. Roy was confused. Neither of his previous "conquests" had been the exact answers to his dreams. Malotte was nice, but no more than an unimaginative plodder. No one would call him a knight in shining armor. Thorpe had shown with plenty of glitter. Yes, in some respects he was an answer to his most reckless dreams. But Roy had let himself be taken too quickly. And later he never had a chance to find out whether Thorpe's glitter had been real or an illusion. And when he had pursued the dream it had blown up into such a nasty mess.

He could not get the picture of Larry's burning house out of his mind. The stove blowing up, the flames spreading across the kitchen floor, to the walls, to those heavy green shades he had seen pulled low over the windows, the roof falling in. Frightening. To be seduced again on the very day that this catastrophe had happened smacked of the most unforgivable wantonness. He must not let himself be seduced right now.

"Seduced". What a false and inappropriate word that was. How could either Malotte or Thorpe have seduced him when he had been ready and on the hunt himself? It was just as fair to say he had seduced them. Even "ruined" them. "Ruined", like a brazen harlot, fitted the Thorpe episode especially.



And "virtue", did that word apply to him? By being so easy to get had he lost his "virtue"? The term's meaning seemed so clear-cut when you spoke of men consorting with women. But he was male, not female, and who would seriously speak of a man losing his virtue? But to flirt with another man when he was straining every facility to get with Larry Thorpe could not be right. So he came to an iron-clad resolution. If Sykes made a pass at him he would rebuff him.

But the annoying thing was Sykes was not making passes at him. He was completely ignoring Grover. Chuck had magnetized all the boys into a tight circle around him and was cleverly drawing them out about 'possum hunting. He was worse than merely clever. He was pouring on the grossest sort of flattery to lure these ten year old boys into the absurd. Apparently he had heard that Texans could be induced to tell tall stories and he was testing the rumor on the kids.

"Man," he said, "I'll bet you've been on a 'possum hunt every month, every week. Why, Man, a boy like you raised in the bayous just might have his hunting dogs out every night--" (There were no bayous around Fort Boomer) This soft nonsense he was feeding to James, and James was falling for it. Yes, he had been hunting pretty often. Yes, every summer. Yes, sometimes oftener. Sometimes in the winter too. In fact winters were best of all. Yes, he had been hunting 'possums ten, maybe, well now when he counted up, maybe thirty--fifty-two times. That was how many times James, who would be eleven in October, had been 'possum hunting. No, fifty-three.

Sykes was dragging out each of these lies with a cooing voice. He had squatted down on the same level with the boy,



stretching out his arms to hold James by either shoulder. He shot out his lures in rapid fire turning his head slightly to one side so he could see the boy's face with a slightly oblique glance.

Little James was no match at all for such slick flattery. He realized that each time he built up the number of his hunts he was pushing himself further and further into the ridiculous, but how could he turn down a chance to brag in front of his fellow scouts when the Captain was making it so easy to do so? Just last week, he claimed, he had bagged a mama 'possum with eighteen little ones. How little were they? First they were about so (he indicated three inches with his hands), then his hands kept spreading further apart until they were as long as the mama, tail and all. He had locked his thumbs under his arm pits and was swaying back and forth in a grand swagger.

In fact every body was swaying. By now they were off paved roads, and Art was pushing the truck for all it was worth over slightly sandy ruts. The woods were now thick on either side, and over-hanging branches kept brushing up against the truck bed. By now the sun had set completely, and the tops of the trees were haloed in pink and gold. Carnes, apparently still trying to keep a hopeless schedule, was taking the bumpy ruts too fast. Certainly everyone riding in the open bed should be squated down to a low center of gravity to protect himself from being jolted out. But the Captain was so interested in making James look silly that he was paying no attention to their safety at all.

Suddenly, Sykes lost all interest in James. He dropped his hands from the boy's shoulders, stood up, looked around,

began whistling a vague tune between his teeth, stuck his hands in his pockets and re-adjusted his testicles. Then, when the boys were thinking he had lost interest in them, he whirled around and spotted a kid on the outskirts of his magnetized circle.

He was Wallace. Somehow Chuck had already picked up his name and now saw no reason why he shouldn't reduce it to Wally. "Wally," he said, pointing his chubby finger straight at him, "I'll bet you've got a girl friend. You haven't got one? Well, what would you do with one if you had one?"

The man was quite far off with his choice of nick-names. Down here in the South "Wallace" was a name that was never shortened. "Wally" sounded utterly foreign and was one of the reasons several of the boys gasped. If Sykes noticed the gasps they didn't bother him at all. Evidently, he saw no reason to handle anyone with silk gloves, not even kids.

Roy was beginning to wonder how Carnes had ever managed to pressure Captain Sykes into chaperoning a Boy Scout occassion. Clearly, the man had no feeling for kids at all, and he had even less respect for local standards of propriety. Come what may, he was going to tease the boys about sex. He had, also, picked on the one least likely to stand up under the pressure of needling. Roy had already spotted Wallace. If he was to baby-sit two wall-flowers tonight this kid would certainly be one of them. It grated on his nerves to see the Captain pestering the boy.

With the mention of the term girl friend most of the boys became quiet. Wallace stuck his fist in his mouth and twisted sideways hoping the big man would go away.

Sykes didn't. He actually giggled at the kid's discomfort..

It egged him on. He scooted through the boys to squat down -- before Wallace and hold his shoulders and look at him sideways just as he had done to James. "Wally, what would you do if we should get caught in a rain tonight, and you ended up sleeping in the same room with some farmer's daughter? Well, come on, Wally, let's imagine the farmer's wife has made a pallet for you to sleep on. It's about six feet from the daughter's bed. The daughter has just turned out the light--"

One of the boys, one whose mind was not yet developed enough to get the drift of this build-up, said, "She'd have to blow it out. The farmers ain't got electric lights."

"Shut up, Squirt," said Sykes, brushing this non-sexual detour aside so he could press his more fascinating elaborations. "Okay. She's flipped out the light. Kicked it out, or maybe thrown it out with the cat. The room's dark. You can hear the real soft rustle of clothes coming off. There's a thunder clap, a flash of lightning. The room lights up, and there she is right in front of you, naked. Well, Wally, what would you see?"

The boys were reacting in all sorts of ways. James, put-out because the attention had shifted away from him, guffawed, a short, sharp donkey bray. It was his bid to get the boys to look at him again. A few of the other kids twittered knowingly. They were the ones who had heard sexual teasing before and knew you were supposed to laugh at it. Others giggled because Wallace was being needled, and you always laughed at Wallace.

Roy was annoyed. The whole idea of Boy-Scouting was turning repulsive. It had never set well with him anyway. Back in rural Oklahoma parents had frowned on Scouts from a vague, un-

explained distrust.

Now when he looked at the group, half of them still drawn together in a magnetized knot, and half broken away in confusion, they didn't seem like kids at all. Rather they were cross-breed animals, half of them adult humans, the other half jungle beasts. A few of them, the ones following Sykes, had hard faces like the little bullies who used to terrorize the school grounds back in Oklahoma. Others looked like silly crosses, humans with baboons, and others were milling sheep looking for a leader to take them to salvation.

Roy was doubly annoyed because he was convinced the man responsible for this disruption was playing games with him. The Captain had led him on and was now dropping him flat. Roy could not be mistaken. Back in front of his house Sykes had given him at least two come-on glances. Yes, his wife had been standing beside him when he did the glancing. Two adult chaperons and seventeen kids were standing there too. But Chuck Sykes had not wavered at all. He had thrown out two come-hither ogglings.

Now the Captain was pretending Grover wasn't even in the truck. Instead of following up his lead he was throwing sex and strowing discord right and left. How Roy wished he were strong and agile enough to push the man off the truck, this truck that was careening dangerously through river bottom underbrush.

At the same time Roy knew full well if he could push Sykes off the truck he would jump out after him in hopes he could make love to him in the bushes. The man had such vitality, such charm. The bastard, he knew people couldn't resist him, so he could behave like a devil and still have a trail of people panting behind him.

Gone were Roy's vows to abandon flirtations in memorial to Thorpe's burned house and disrupted life. Thorpe was gone. Common sense told him the parting could be forever. Right now he was faced with another problem. Good-looking Sykes. Common sense also told him to forget this smart-alec who was gleefully turning the back of the truck upside down.

But it was impossible to forget Chuck. He was flaunting himself under Roy's nose. This man had emitted two tantalizing, promising glances. Their promise was growing rather than diminishing.

Roy must think. Seduction. For a long time he had been playing with the notion that neither Malotte nor Thorpe had pulled off their seductions all by themselves. Probably Roy had been as responsible as they. Therefore he, himself, must have considerable appeal.

The idea grew. If he had appeal, maybe he, alone, could melt Sykes into abject compliance. It would be a real triumph if a seventeen year old boy could lure a world-hardened, married Air Force captain into willingness. Grover made up his mind. If it was possible to seduce this man he was going to do it.

Little Wallace was still twisting and turning, his fist was still in his mouth preventing any sounds but grunts from coming out. But Sykes kept a firm grip on his shoulders and painted ever more lurid word pictures of what a naked farm girl would look like. "--She's stretched out on the bed, the covers thrown back because it's too hot--"

The other boys were watching each other trying to figure out how they were supposed to react. Should they laugh as James and one or two others were doing? Or should they try to make themselves inconspicuous as Wallace was not able to do?

Roy was disgusted. These sensual stories were not appropriate for boys from respectable families. Yes, he knew one of the reasons for taking Scouts on an outing was to initiate them into the mysteries of manhood. It was intended that one or two of the bolder boys would circulate a few risque stories. The chaperons were expected to accidentally drop a little "slang", just as they were supposed to become slightly more relaxed about "taking a piss". In other mild ways the kids were to be led up to the edges of adult male life. But at the edge they were to stop. Sykes was getting close to going beyond the outer fringe.

Or was he? Was he being rough with Wallace or not? Sykes was so likeable it was difficult to say anything he did was wrong. Even when he was cruel he was also likeable. Holding little Wallace for example. The kid was squirming. Roy felt sorry for him and wanted to help him get away. But did Wallace really want to get loose? This holding by the shoulders was making Grover feel a tinge of jealousy. He couldn't help but wish that the Captain would pin him down like that. No, as long as Sykes was free to turn on his charm nothing could stop him.

How could he throw a monkey wrench into this man's unbeatable allure? What could he do in the back of a truck? Here there was nothing but boys and bare boards. Wait a minute. Over there in the corner was a dog turd, the thing that had caused James to rip out the word, "shit". Miraculously, no one had stepped in it. Would it be possible to edge it over so Sykes would put his shoe in it, maybe sit in it?

No luck at all. Scarcely had he noticed it before a little

fellow named Duane saw it too. Duane's parents had given him a new flashlight to take along on the hunt. Its bright metal end had been sticking out of the top of his pocket for the whole trip. The turd rolled slightly, maybe two inches over toward the Captain which put it at least a yard away from the man's heel. But that was too close for the enraptured Duane. To save the Captain he sacrificed messing up his precious flashlight. Quickly he took it out of his pocket and flicked the turd out through the openings in the side board. And to get the mess off the metal case he risked getting bitten by the more uneasy of the three hounds. He wiped it off on the dog's fur. The hound growled. All three of them were still uneasy.

Suddenly Sykes became tired of Wallace and turned to Louis. Louis, after James, was the most popular of the boys. So in his pattern of picking on the kids Chuck was jumping from the top to the bottom of the pecking order, then back up toward the top again. Like everything else the man was doing he was planting seeds of confusion and jealousy, especially jealousy. James had sizzled to get attention while Sykes cross-questioned Wallace. Now he must sizzle even more while the spot-light was turned on his nearest rival.

"Looie," said the Captain. "What have you been hiding over here in the corner about? I'll bet you've been afraid of one of these little boys, haven't you? Afraid he'll clean your plow. Have you been in a fight today? You haven't? I'll bet that's what you're afraid to get into. Oh yes that's it. I can tell when I'm right. Now which one is it you're afraid of? Is it James?"

The Captain was brazenly defying Art's rule to keep the

boys from fighting. He was also making both Louis and James extremely uneasy. Both had held their popularity, not through winning fights, but by cleverly staying out of them. Some how they were never the ones who got challenged. Rather they were both masters at egging other people into quarrels while they stood on the sidelines and made sarcastic comments.

Now they were finding themselves pushed into a confrontation they couldn't back out of, one right in front of their whole group. This was not the way James wanted to regain the spotlight.

Both boys tried to solve the problem by naming someone else. "Floyd and Pete were having a fight today. Floyd swiped Pete's chewing gum. I saw him do it. They had a fight, and Floyd hasn't given it back yet. But we didn't have a fight."

"Aw, come on, boys.. You're both yellow. Let's get this settled right here in the back of the truck. (There ain't nothing to settle.) Come on, Looie, let's see how you put 'em up to start off. (Pete's good at startin' off. You ought to see him.) Now wait a minute. I'll bet you don't even know how to start off. Let's see how Jim puts 'em up. Show him, Jim. Show him how to put 'em up. Come on, get 'em up there. He's going to take a poke at you. Better get them up fast--"

Roy was thinking hard. How about the dogs? Were they as infatuated with Charles Sykes as the boys were? Chuck might know all about fist fights, but he was making a mistake with the hounds. He was squatting down in front of them. His back was turned to the one he had swatted earlier in the ride, and in his efforts to get the kids fighting he was making quick movements slapping each boy on the back or else making unusual



feinting motions with his fists.

Roy looked around. Each of the kid's eyes were turned toward the uncomfortable James and Louis. Carefully, Grover scrunched down and slipped the tether hook off the collar of the dog Chuck had swatted. The animal didn't know what to do. Was he supposed to desert the other hounds who were still tied up? Was he supposed to jump off the truck? Impossible since it was moving. Should he mix with the boys or stay away from them? He looked at Roy and snarled.

Slowly, Roy pushed the dog's muzzle around with his knee forcing the animal to take a step closer toward Sykes.

"Come on, Jim. You're not going to let Looie get in the first lick are you?"

Looie thought he saw his chance and abruptly let fly at James. James threw one back. The fight was on. Sykes, fascinated, suddenly rose up from his squatting position and stepped back. He mashed the hound's foot when he did so. Instantly the dog sunk his teeth into the Captain's leg. Frenzied shouts came up from around the fighters.

A startled Air Force officer turned around to see what in the hell had happened. His wild stare happened to fall on Roy's countenance before it fell on the dog. Roy hadn't the time to disguise his facial expression, and the Captain caught his cunning look of triumph.

The fighting boys were jostling against Chuck's shoulders before he had a chance to look at and swat the creature which had bitten him. In a pout he raised his right hand to deal the hound a heavy blow. Too late. The hound snapped at his fingers first and clamped down with his fangs. Sykes cursed and kicked

him loose. Blood streamed down from his hand, and as he looked back at Roy you got the impression it also came from his eyes.

"That was a smart move, Cutie Pants," he said. "But it ain't going to get you anything."

Roy calmly reached out and hooked up the dog who didn't seem to mind being fastened as long as it was done by someone besides Sykes.

The two boys' fight turned out to be brief. It was already over--a draw. Now all seventeen of the Cubs turned back to look at what had happened to the Captain. A bloody hand? How had their super idol gotten that? At least three of them gasped. They also noticed his face did not have that sharp eager expression he wore when sicking the boys on. Now he looked sullen, and he pranced uncomfortably in the swaying truck.

With his left hand he tried to reach his right back pocket and pull out his handkerchief but couldn't make it. He must use his bloody right hand to reach for this temporary bandage. The maneuver left red smears on his hip pocket. The smears from the bite and the caked mud from the "cowboy" left him looking downright sloppy. You could tell he was normally a fastidious dresser. All these unexpected reverses were plunging him into a deep pout, and in retaliation he kicked out at the hound. The hound snapped back, but Roy was keeping a steady hand on his tether, and no damage was done.

Duane asked what had happened, and Chuck told him to shut up.

The truck chugged through a streak of deep sand then pulled into a little clearing. The headlights illuminated a wire gate and a thick bank of trees beyond. The day was al-

most gone. The west still sported a fringe of light colored sky over which floated a few pink clouds. But a crescent moon and the evening star were out. In the east all was dark. A few more minutes and night would be upon them.

Elmore called out from the cab for James to open the gate. With the sound of this familiar voice from up front the boys relaxed. James jumped down from the truck like a rabbit. Ah, he was again the center of attention. Thank heavens home town men who recognized his true position were now calling the turns instead of this stranger who had butted himself in from no where. In a flash the little fellow had the wire bailing slipped off and the gate thrown open. The truck pulled through, and Art called out, "Boys, this is it. Careful with the dogs. Everybody in a circle while we pledge our Boy Scout honor."

The Cubs gleefully jumped off the truck. Sykes shook off his pout as quickly as one flips away a cigarette, and, carefully concealing his bandaged hand, he took his position with the other two adults. In a matter of seconds this dynamo had Elmore laughing. Was Carnes cool toward him? No, in another second Art was laughing too.

But Art was not going to waste much time with jokes. Still determined to get the outing back on schedule he had the pledge of honor over in less than three minutes. Then with the boys still in a circle he ordered four of them to step toward the center. These, he announced would go with Captain Sykes, the dog called Duke and Floyd. Four more were called out who would go with Mr. Elmore, Senator and Louis. Another four were picked to go with himself, Scout and James. "Wallace, you and Duane stay with Roy. Alright, Troop, we don't want anyone to get

hurt. We don't want anyone to get lost. We want everybody to act like little gentlemen, show good sportsmanship and get lots of 'possums. Now at every hour I want each chaperon and Roy to give two sharp whistles. That means everything is okay. If something goes wrong give three sharp whistles and stay calm until I get there. At eleven o'clock everyone comes back to the truck and counts his 'possums. Good hunting, boys."

It looked like good humor was restored. The dog called Duke which was assigned to go with Sykes and Floyd was not the one which had bitten the Captain's hand. That one was Scout, and he was getting along fine with James and Carnes.

Carnes was beaming with a solemn sort of happiness. He now had things running on a disciplined, organized basis. With the fall of darkness they were starting their hunt almost as planned. Only the romp, a disorganized orgy that he never really approved of, was omitted. Most important of all true leadership was being given its chance.

Art worshiped leadership. He believed it was something natural born, and democratic attempts to thwart it were disgusting. Hence he was giving James every opportunity to strut and show his stuff. James, with no marks at all from his brief fight, had taken Scout's tether and was leading his squad off into the darkness.

Sykes and his crew were getting under way almost as fast. Duke had let out a baying sound, and Grover heard the Captain in his clipped speech say, "Get going, Suction Cup. Let's beat it out of here." Roy whispered to Duane, "Quick, run after him. Show him your flashlight. Ask him if he needs it."

Duane took off like a sprinter and managed to catch the

group just as they were disappearing around a dense thicket. Several moments passed. Frogs began to croak off in the distance. An evening breeze sprang up which sent leaves drifting passed the wheels of the truck.

Slowly Duane appeared around the edge of the thicket. His face was crestfallen, and with the sound of the three baying hounds getting fainter he drug his way back to Grover. "Well, no. I guess he doesn't need it," he said.

"Wait here," said Roy. "I'll be back in a moment."

It was surprising how much distance the Captain had already put between his party and the truck. Roy must run fast to catch up with them. But Duke, acting in a strange way, was making lots of noise, and their direction was easy to follow. When he caught up with them the dog was not sniffing amongst the leaves, but had his head held high, his nose pointed in the air, and was making rapid zig-zag movements to get through the underbrush as fast as possible.

"Hey, Captain," Roy said. "You don't really care whether old Art gets everything his way, do you? Why not take my two boys along? Seven's not too many in one bunch."

"You warm your end of the bench, and I'll warm mine," said Sykes. "Mush, you fuckin' mutt. Put a lot of distance between us and this sugar plum fairy."

Roy laughed at this insult and continued to tag along beside the chaperon. "Where are you headed? Down by the river? That's outsidie the forty acres."

"None of your business where I'm headed."

"I'm going to take Wallace and Duane and go down to the river and hunt frogs. Since we aren't looking for 'possums it'

won't matter if we crawl under the fence. Why don't you crawl through and join us? No telling what your dog would scare up down there. Maybe the two boys will get lost off. Well, Maybe."

"That's just fine, Sugar Plum. You go down there and crawl right through and wait for us. Hold your breath while you're at it."

"There's a first aid kit in the truck. You could use it to fix up your hand. You don't want it to get infected do you?"

"Get lost."

"I'm going to take the first aid kit down to the river. If you decide you need some monkey blood or something you can come over and get it. Duane will have his flashlight turned on. We'll be easy to find."

"You're going to be blowing monkey blood out your friggin' nose the first thing you know. Get gone."

"If you see a flashlight over toward the river it'll probably be me and my bunch," said Roy. Not for an instant did he let on like Chuck's rebuffs had done the job. A long time ago he had found out it didn't do any good to let someone get under your skin.

On his way back to the truck he sized up what Art would be able to do if someone fouled up his nice plans. Certainly if he found out his squadrons weren't staying separated as instructed then he would throw a fit, and they would spend the rest of the outing keeping out of the way of his thunder bolts. But if he didn't know the groups got mixed up until it was all over what could he do?

He would sulk on the way home, but he wouldn't dare carry things much further than that. Duane's and Wallace's parents,

for example, would be glad to hear their boys had gotten behind a hound. No one at home would back Carnes up, and he would have to swallow his sulk and forget it. So Roy saw no reason why he couldn't rearrange things slightly.

Shucks, with some luck he could get shed of his boys completely, and with another break or two he could set it up so Sykes could be free of his group for thirty minutes or so-- if the Captain should want to get free. He would only need to act under seemingly innocent motivations and the stage could be set for a successful "seduction".

These adventuresome thoughts made him a little giddy. For an instant he even panicked, afraid he had lost his way and was not headed back to the truck. A fine thing if he should spend the rest of the night going around in circles within the forty acres and should have to "halloo" three times to get someone to lead him out. Night had now taken completely over, and before him was a formless black blob that he couldn't remember seeing when he had set out to find Sykes.

Two small parts of the blob were moving. Good heavens, it was the truck itself, and Wallace and Duane were coming out to meet him. Curses on Art's rule for requiring a complete blackout. It was only reluctantly that he had allowed the three chaperons to carry lanterns at all, and they must be kept hooded until a 'possum was actually treed. To hell with this fussiness. Roy was going to use a flash light when he needed it.

Duane in his thin little voice was asking what had happened. It was so obvious that he wanted to go with one of the groups but he didn't dare speak out.

"No," said Roy. "The Captain didn't think he could use your flashlight, and he thought seven boys would be too many. But wait a minute. Isn't that Mr. Elmore's hound baying right over there?"

Roy and his two boys stopped to listen, Duane fingering the latch on his flashlight hoping he would get a chance to turn it on. No more than a hundred yards off, so close you could hear the rustle of feet tromping on twigs, a dog barked. It sounded like General's deep voice, but it was not the inspiring bay of a dog on scent. It was just a bark. Roy wondered why Elmore wasn't further away. But for whatever reason he and his group were still close enough to contact.

Before he struck out after them Grover made a quick search of the truck to see if the necessary ingredients for his plans were there. Yes, there on the floor boards of the cab was a black box about the size of a typewriter case. He touched it and heard bottles rattle. The first aid kit that he would use as an excuse to lure Sykes away from his boys. But some bad luck. The thing was locked. A silly, tiny little pad-lock, the kind you see on toy furniture and kids' things, kept the hasp closed. Some more of Art's doings. Only he would have the key.

Or would he? Perhaps Elmore might have a second key. "Wait here," he told the boys and ran off in the direction General was barking.

He plowed his way through scratchy live-oaks to get to the little group. There they were, stopped in a loose circle with the dog as its center. Mr. Elmore was disobeying Art's orders slightly. His kerosene lantern was equipped with a



metal hood that fitted tightly over the glass globe. But Elmore had shimmed a match under the metal sleeve so a faint circle of light played straight down on the ground. Ten feet away from them you couldn't see it at all, and up close it looked like everybody was standing around a phosphorescent wraith.

General was not sniffing the ground. Louis and Elmore were keeping him still in an uneasy squatting position. They were on either side of him, and both were whispering soft assurances in his ear.

Elmore laughed when he saw Roy come up and said, "Ain't this somethin'? We've come up with a hound that won't even trail. He's bustin' a gut to streak off through the bushes. Ain't no point in huntin' 'possums until he gets smoothed over. What do you think? You think anybody'll come up with an honest to God 'possum tonight, or are we all goin' to git left holdin' the sack?"

Off in the distance you could hear Chuck's hound giving his funny bark, and with each one getting further and further away. The Captain's pack of Cubs must now be almost to the limit of the forty acres. What would they do when they got to the fence? Roy turned his ear in the other direction to try to spot some noise from Carnes's group. It had been several minutes since they had heard a bark in that direction, and now there was nothing. The woods were growing quiet. The sunset breeze that had sprung up with the change of light was dying down. Was that an owl? If so it was away across the river. The thin crescent moon was far over toward the west and would not be with them very long. Some stray clouds were drifting overhead and blocking out most of the stars so that velvety darkness was all around

them.

"What do you think's happened to Mr. Carnes?" Roy speculated.

"That there's a funny thing, ain't it?" said Mr. Elmore. "His hound let out a few bays then they shut him up. Old Art must have somethin' up his sleeve. As for me and my bunch, we're going to take it easy until this here hound gets his mind on 'possums. How's your two boys gettin' along?"

Ah, the opening Roy wanted. And it worked. All he had to do was ask the easy going Mr. Elmore, and it was arranged. "Why shore. Tell that Duwane and Wallace to come with us. That's a damn fool notion havin' two little tykes off to themselves just because they ain't got much frisky to 'em. You three come along with us."

Three. That meant Roy also, and that was not quite what Grover wanted. But by approaching the hurdle in a round about way he felt he could solve that problem.

For a moment he, too, petted the restless General. He asked if here in July the female 'possums would have pouches full of little ones or would they all be grown up and left. (We'll see what we'll see.) And he asked if anyone could hear an owl. (Yes.) Then, "Is everybody all right? Anybody hurt yet?"

"Why no," said Elmore. "Nobody's hurt. This shindig's just started."

"That Air Force fellow hurt his hand. He needs some first aid," said Roy.

"Oh, does he? Well, old Art left the first aid box on the floor boards. You can run and take that Air Force feller some first aid and get back and join us. You'll hear General

baying like a huntin' dog's supposed to pretty soon." Roy reported that the box was locked. "Locked up? Well, ain't that jest like old Art. Well," he said, leaning forward in a whisper, "I'll tell you a little secret. That lock don't amount to nothin'. You open it with a paper clip. There's one already sprangled out up on the dash. You got a flashlight so you can find it?" Roy was sure he could get it open, but it might take quite awhile to find the Captain and get him fixed up. "Well, that don't matter. We're goin' to be stuck out here 'til midnight anyway. You send your boys over, then go fix up that Air Force man. When you get through you'll hear General barkin'."

Roy was eager to get started, but Elmore called him back to tell him another very good idea, one that Grover liked immensely. "Say. I don't think that Captain knows much about huntin'. His boys is likely to come back empty handed. After you get him bandaged up tell him to come over and join our bunch. Scout and General will hunt better together than they will separate anyway. Maybe we'll find a female with a tree full of half grown 'possums. Won't that be somethin'?"

Roy went back for the two boys and got them over to Elmore's in a few minutes. Then he returned to the truck to pick the lock on the first aid kit. It was not as easy to do as the chaperon had said it would be. Fiddling with a paper clip in the dark made him impatient, and on the spur of the moment he decided to forget the whole business of guaze and Mercurochrome. All he needed to get Sykes down to the river was a flashlight, and that he had been careful to borrow from the kid.

The river. It's banks were further away from the fenced-in forty acres and it was harder to get to than he had thought. First he snagged his pants crawling through the barbed wire. Such bad luck right at the start seemed ominous, especially since he was being careful to keep a cool head and not do something foolish like get lost.

A little further on he stumbled over a log. At least it felt like a log. He could not tell for sure. As soon as he had righted himself he flicked on his light to see what kind of territory was confronting him. Why not turn on the light? Not only would it notify the Captain that his plan to run off to the river was materializing, but there was no sense in floundering into the paws of a panther just to obey a fuddy-duddy's rule about lights. But Duane's little gadget turned out to be an ineffective thing. All he could see in front of him was scratchy limbs and the irregular leaves of rarely sun-lit underbrush.

Off in the distance he could hear the gurgle of flowing water clearly, so clearly he seemed to be within a stone's throw of the river banks. He felt his way into the irregular leaves and found some more leaves, more limbs and more logs to fall over. Every advance must be done cautiously. Not only must he pick a sensible route through which to go forward, but he must turn around and familiarize himself with the looks of the route behind him. That would be what he would be looking at when he came back..

The swilling sound of flowing water seemed to come from all around him. What if he should step off the river bank before he knew he was there and sink into a cold under-tow? Was there quick sand around here? He had heard terrifying stories of that stuff, but he had never seen any. What was it like?

Better switch on the light again. Was that grass under his feet, chigger laden grass? How could grass grow in dense brush like this?

Where was everybody? He stood dead still to try to hear something besides the noise of a flowing river. Yes, one hound was baying, a deep bay such as Duke gave out. But the bay seemed to come from a long way off. Was Sykes leading his pack in the opposite direction? Had he been wrong in sizing up Chuck? How could he be? Those glances had been real. They were like the ones Mallotte and Thorpe had tossed his way. And wouldn't a man who had defied so many rules in the back of the truck want to break through the forty acres' fence and get to good hunting ground?

He had better switch on his light again, shine it high up in the trees so Sykes would be sure to get the signal.

Such a tiny bulb, and was it growing weaker. If so he'd better save it to flash on the ground and see what he was stepping into. So he played it down at the base of the trees as he went further along. The tree trunks were getting bigger. That meant he was near the water. And what was that he picked up? A dark opening in the ground. It was a gully, how deep and where it drained to he could not tell.

An animal moved in the bushes. Something plopped into water. Frightening. What kind of animal could it be? And it sounded like he had hit the water no more than ten feet away. Keep calm. It could only be a frog. And if he were that close to the water he could throw a pebble through the leaves and listen how it landed. At his feet was a worn, water-washed stone. He picked it up and heaved it through the leaves. Almost at

at once it struck water.

That was close. If he had pushed forward through these brambles as thoughtlessly as he had been, he would now be fighting water. How deep and how swift the current was here he had no idea.

In fact the whole river side was different from what he had expected. In his mind's eye he had pictured himself with Chuck stretched out on a sandy bank, conveniently high and solid enough to dangle bare toes in pleasantly cool foam. Any tree branches present would be high up over head. No clouds would be blotting out the moon, and instead of frogs jumping in the water they would hear whippoorwills serenading from distant boughs...

Instead he must stop right here. Thorny vines and hard-edged leaves hemmed him in on all sides. It wasn't even safe to hunt up a roomy clearing big enough to stretch out in. Another step in any direction but backwards might drop him off into a bottomless gully. Yes, he must be content to squat down on the slick patch of vegetation at his feet and there play his flashlight beam up on the leaves, be patient and wait.

He sat down and listened to the noises of the night. Something else went plunk in the water. He hoped it was merely another frog and not something more sinister. The lapping of flowing current seemed much louder than he had expected. It even blanked out the sound of the owl, that is, if the owl was still hooting. Not only was there the sound of lapping waves but the river made other vague noises, things swilling around, dropping off, falling in. Even by freezing all motion to the point of holding his breath he still could hear nothing at all

from any of the three packs.

Now he picked up indefinite noises from the woods. Unknown scurrying sounds mingled with the whisperings from the river. How foolish it had been for him to come down here. What had made him think he could get Sykes to trot down and join him? When he thought about it objectively it was because he had fallen into two easy conquests before and had gotten the idea that all handsome men would be equally easy to make. He had based the whole scheme on two glances and the supposition that a high-strung man like Chuck would get bored chaperonning kids. And in doing so he had ignored the fact that Sykes had called him a fairy and told him to get lost.

Roy got ahold of himself. He had only been here a few minutes. How could he expect the Captain to break away from his pack so easily? What excuse would he use? Grover had not made his plan clear when he ran after him and brazenly invited him to desert and come down to the river. He had not specifically told him, "when you see my light that means I'll be down there by myself". And that was because at that time he hadn't known exactly how he could work things out. He must give Sykes time. The night was young, maybe no more than nine o'clock.

But at nine o'clock he should be hearing two whistles, and he had heard nothing. Maybe it was later than nine, like ten. When he had crawled through the fence he might have taken a course so far off that now he was out of earshot of any signals the three groups might make.

Again he fought panic. He told himself that he was a perfectly nice boy. Only a few months ago he had been an honor

student in highschool. His reputation was as good as any. Proof of that was the fact he had been chosen to chaperon Cub Scouts.

But tonight he had been flighty enough to defy Art and amalgamate the wall-flowers with the more virile youths, and he had paved the way to throw two whole packs together. That was not good judgement, and when the story came out his reputation would not be that of an honor student, but of an upstart who couldn't obey orders.

What was he sitting on? Grass. Grass meant chiggers. Someone had said something about chiggers earlier in the day. Oh yes, it was Sykes's wife. She had yelled a sentence about chigger spray. What was chigger spray? Everyone knew there was nothing you could do for those little pests. Ah, he knew the answer to that. Men in the service were always getting used as guinea pigs to try out new cures. Anyone with sense knew most of them didn't work.

But why would a man like the Captain, one who had turned the whole Southern pecking system upside down there in the back of the truck, let himself get used as a guinea pig? Why had he joined the Air Force? He couldn't have made captain if he were only a draftee. He had to have joined up of his own free will, which meant he couldn't be much account. He was conceited. He was overbearing. He probably came from some far off place like New York or Rhode Island.

Something was wrong. He should be hearing two whistles by now.

He stood up. He must face the fact he was lost.



He sat down. No, he was not lost. He was undergoing an attack of nerves. If he wore a watch he would know that he had been here only a few minutes. No where near time enough for Sykes to get here. To prove he was not lost he would arise and walk the hundred yards or so to the forty acres' fence, then come back to this identical spot and wait. There would be no problem in reaching the fence because he had memorized the way. It began between that drooping limb and forked briar vine hanging beside it.

He risked one more signal with the small flashlight, then got up and pushed his way between the limb and vine. This return trip did not mean he was backing out. Rather it meant that he was being sensible by getting the return path firmly established in his mind.

Had he crouched beneath so many snarled limbs as now hit his face when he came this way before? Were there as many stobs and runners catching at his feet as there were now? Of course there had been. In that case why was he running? Why was his heart beating so fast, and why hadn't he come to an open clearing where he could stand up and see a few feet ahead of him? When he came this way he had not been forced to crawl on all-fours for so long a stretch of territory as this.

He stumbled over a log, a bad stumble that threw him down head first with his hands spread out to claw at slippery roots. Never mind. It must be the same log he had fallen over during his first trip, so he must now be only a few steps from the fence.

He rose up on his elbows to look at the log. No, he had not caught his toe on a log. A briar had tripped him. A briar

when he was supposed to be a hundred yards from the river and near a pasture that had been burned free of such things.

A light blinded him. In the split second before terror froze him still he recognized the beam came from a much more powerful flashlight than the near toy that he carried in his hand, or rather that he used to carry in his hand. It had bounced out when he had fallen.

He screamed and tried to get up. But the briar was wrapped around his ankle, holding him fast and sawing into his flesh. He had not known briar thorns could cut so deeply nor that the fibery vines could hold as tightly as chains.

Every time he moved the flashlight beam moved too to keep glaring straight in his eyes. Who was holding it? Had he bungled into a boot-legger's still, a robber's hideout? Was he about to be kidnapped? Again he screamed and said two words, "No, no!" The light still played directly into his eyes so it was impossible to see who was holding it.

A voice, one that was meant to be calm but had an odd quality to it, came from slightly above and behind the flashlight. "What are you looking for?"

That was not a robber, nor a boot-legger and certainly not Charles Sykes. It was Art Carnes who was pinning him down with a light and pretending to keep his voice relaxed to a matter-of-fact level while he was doing so.

"Is that you, Mr. Carnes?" Why did Roy's throat have to produce such thin, shaky tones?

"You've lost Duane's flashlight, haven't you?" said Carnes. "You had no business taking a ten-year-old's play-pretty away from him. What did you take it for? What did you come down

to the river for?"

Roy could not answer. He couldn't even get up.

"What are you going to tell Duane when you come back without his flashlight?"

"Why, Mr. Carnes, if you'll just turn your light out of my eyes and put it down on the ground a little bit I can find it. I haven't lost anything."

Carnes's voice turned from matter-of-fact to nasty. "Find it yourself. You lost it."

Roy kept still. He wished the light were out of his eyes, but he knew Art would not take it out. He was caught tangled in a briar and was going to have to take whatever this man dished out. But he could try once to reason with him. "Mr. Carnes," he said, "you can find Duane's toy easy. All you have to do is sweep your light a few times over the ground and we can see it. Why don't you do it?"

"You shitty little cocksucker," Carnes hissed. "You thought you were going to run down to the river and get something, didn't you? Hmm? I know your kind. I spotted you and sized you up just about as soon as I saw you. I've been watching you. Who did you think you were going to lure off down here? Were you going to pay this one twenty-five dollars? Or were you going to try to get it for nothing?"

"Well, you're not going to get nothing, Because Captain Sykes came to me and told me all about what you were up to. He was more of a man than that Thorpe was. Twenty-five dollars for a goddamn blow job, and I don't think you even got it. Zilla and Georgia and I have traced old Thorpe's movements ever since

he came home and his wife showed him the money. We don't think he had time to meet you.

"If you try meeting anyone else you're going to meet the county sheriff instead. I'm a damn fool for not jerking you up off the ground and carrying you down to jail right now. But I've got respect for your sister and brother-in-law. I'm letting you off with a warning. It's the only one you'll get from me. Now, find that kid's flashlight in the dark."

Off went the light. Abrupt darkness now blinded Roy as he heard Carnes tromp over some twigs and vanish.

Roy knew the first thing he must do was get his foot untangled. Then he must get up, and before he left the area, search every inch of the ground for Duane's toy. It would not do any good to think about what he had just heard, It would take hours, days, probably weeks before he would be able to stand to one side and size up Mr. Carnes's trick.

There was nothing else he could do besides find the flashlight and go back to the truck. If he was going to be faced with the public exposure that he was a cocksucker it was too late to do anything about it. Carnes had made a half-way promise to keep his mouth shut. Time alone would tell if he would keep it. It would do no good to beg him to do so.

He might blurt it out tonight and Roy would have to ride home with Elmore and the kids staring at him. He didn't give a damn whether Sykes glared at him or not. Forget that man. He was nothing more than a good-looking face he had met for the first time only a few hours ago. In a few more hours he would pass on and be gone forever.

This calm analysis lasted while he was getting the briar unwound from his ankle. But by the time he was able to stand up and brush the mud from his clothes the self-control was in shambles. Carnes was an asshole. He was a sneak, a phoney, a suck-butt, a narrow-minded hypocritical turd. The idea of his bragging that he should carry Roy off to jail.

To jail. That sonofabitch couldn't get Roy to jail. Roy would kill him. He would take that briar and wrap it around the bastard's neck and choke him until his tongue and eyeballs popped out. Then he would drag his twitching body down to the river and toss it in. As his head bounced up from under the foam Roy would scream, "Roast in hell."

No, he would not do that. Phantasies like that were silly. No body ever got by with a murder. And Grover's next phantasy was picturing what would happen if he should actually toss Art's corpse in the foam. "I'd have to walk home. Twenty miles. Or is it thirty? I don't even know which direction home is. And when I got there it wouldn't be home any more. As soon as I packed a few things in a sack I would have to scoot out to get ahead of the police. I'd have to keep ahead of the law forever, without money. I would have to rob something to get money to eat. I'm not going to do anything like that. It's smarter to stay calm and laugh at him."

Right now he must find that kid's toy. Restoring the light to Duane would be part of restoring his own honor. Staying calm in front of the boys would also be a part of keeping his honor as bright as the Cub Scouts had pledged to do just this night. Finding the light would also be a lesson in self-control.

Where could the flashlight be? The thing to do was use his head and figure out where it could be. After that he must find his way back to the fence, and then back to the truck. Never once must he resort to giving three whistles for help. When he got back and faced the rest of the crowd he must behave with self-confidence, and if anyone mentioned "cocksucker" he must say, "So what?"

He stooped down on the ground until he felt the briar that had tripped him. Then he stretched out over the musty soil, doing his best to get back in the exact place where he had tumbled when Art's torch had blinded him. Then he felt in the leaves with his right hand. Slowly he moved his hand in circles, careful never to skip any space. His eyes were now well enough adjusted to the darkness for him to make out lumpy outlines on the ground. Perhaps he could see the case, but more likely it would be half covered in leaves.

His hand touched it. He shook off the leaf mold and held the metal up in the dim light. It sparkled. His honor was partially restored.

He made one false start before he found the fence. He had quite a bit more trouble finding the truck because Art had moved it. As he learned by pumping Duane on the way home, Art had showed up toward the end of the hunt, had made some excuse about bird droppings falling on the windshield, and had started up the truck and moved it a hundred feet or so behind a thicket. More spite work. It cost Roy another twenty minutes peering at tire tracks in the dark before he found where the truck was.

He was at the truck, but he was not yet back in contact with any other members of the outing. Still he was not in a position to erase the fact that he had been the worst possible Scout chaperon. The truck, in its new location, was empty. Someone had opened the first aid kit, for what reason he could not tell. Also they had removed the tow sacks from the storage space behind the front seat as well as the box of sandwiches Velma had included as a refresher snack to be eaten just before coming home. The woods were quiet. Roy had not heard a hound bay in a long time.

The hunt must be over. The missing tow sacks suggested they had caught something. The missing sandwiches coupled with the deserted truck was a puzzler. Why hadn't they held their final gathering here around the vehicle?

Grover listened for noises. Soon he heard faint voices. It sounded like kids who had been firmly disciplined to keep quiet. Some more of Art's spite. To keep Roy lost as long as possible he had held the farewell gathering in the center of the woods. By stumbling through more thickets and down a gully Grover at last reached the group.

Everyone were sitting in a close circle finishing up their sandwiches. The three chaperons and the hounds were in the center along with the three lanterns, all now unhooded. But since they were in a sizable gully Roy was not able to see any light until he was right on them. Carnes had made it as difficult as possible to get back to the group.

James, now strutting confidently, was standing near the center, so near he was almost in contact with Art. He was holding up a motionless form that was curled up in a ball. Another

sack bulging with more motionless forms was at his feet. The furry thing he held in his hand was a female 'possum now playing dead. Its tail was curled up like a spiral, but Louis and Floyd were tugging at it trying to straighten it out. They succeeded, and the thing gradually rolled out as though it were lifeless.

Elmore saw Roy first. "Well, look who's back. Did you catch a lot of frogs?"

Roy smiled and threw his head back and put his hands on his hips to look the crowd over. Had he said something to Elmore about catching frogs? Myabe he had, but it sounded like the man was trying to cover up for him. It wouldn't do to be caught studying his face too closely. Roy would have to do that later and by watching him off at a distance. He must be cautious even about such things as face reading. He could not expect to find out if he had been "told on" with only a glance or two.

"Not a single frog," he said cheerfully.

Out of the corner of his eye he examined Carnes's face. Art was sullen, and when he wasn't looking at James he was looking at the ground. Either he had not told what he "knew", or his sensational story had not caused the explosion he thought it should merit.

In a moment Roy would risk looking at the Captain to study his face. Already he had noticed Sykes's hand was carefully bandaged. Who had done it? When had he come back to the truck for first aid?

Duane was glad to get his flashlight back. But aside from this kid the boys didn't seem to notice Roy nor to see anything



unusual about his reappearing alone. Someone, probably Elmore must have fed the boys a cover-up story. Did that mean Elmore knew what Carnes "knew" and didn't care? You couldn't depend on that. All you could do was be cautious. Inch forward a step at a time.

The boys were talking about the forms in the sack. Gradually the story of the hunt fell together. Carnes had merged his five boys with Sykes's pack early in the hunt (Aha, Carnes had broken his own rule. A crafty fellow, this Carnes), This had left Art free to return to the truck to get first aid to bandage Chuck's hand. While he was gone Scout and Duke (they worked well together) treed a female 'possum and five half grown ones. The half grown ones were in the sack, and James was still bragging about these new trophies in his long list of hunting victories.

Roy now dared to look at Sykes. He had been holding on to a faint hope that Carnes had lied, and that Chuck had not blabbed about the "proposition" he had tried to set up. But one glance at the Captain's face revealed that Art had told the truth. Never once did he let his eyes seek out Roy's. The man was glibly talking to Art, rattling on compulsively about an elk hunt up in Canada. If there had been any ill feeling between the Captain and the Scout leader it was now patched up.

When they broke up the party and returned to the truck Sykes rode in the cab with the other two adults. Only Roy was left to ride in the open bed with the kids, and all of them were sleepy on the way home. By the time they dropped the Captain at his house all but James and Louis had dozed off. When

they reached River Terrace even those two were fast asleep. By then everyone in the bed of the truck was asleep but Roy.

Carnes pulled some more spite. Instead of driving by the Skirvin house he stopped on the highway opposite the River Terrace Coffee Shop. "Stopped" is not exactly the term. He only slowed down. Roy sensed the driver would not honor him by coming to a dead halt and immediately jumped off the bed. The truck was picking up speed by the time he hit the ground. Roy wanted to look back and see if Elmore was waving goodnight to him. But he decided against it. He might collect a dirty look from Carnes. He hurried home. Blanche was asleep, but she had left a stewer of cocoa warming on the kitchen range.

Roy was hoping he would not lose any sleep. But that was not to be. He tossed and tumbled on his cot all night. The nearest he came to dozing was near day break when his mind went through a hazy period. Then he heard Blanche stirring around in the kitchen.

What would Blanche's face tell him when it came time to look at her this morning? Had the exploded scandal reached as far as her? Was it ever possible to tell how far gossip had traveled by studying people's faces, or would most people keep unmentionable things like this to themselves? His sister might chose to do just that. What else could she do? Get hysterical? Send him to some crank of a minister in some church? That did not sound like Blanche. More likely she would think the matter over for days, even months before she decided if it was necessary to act at all.

However, he was in for a surprise. Something entirely different had come up. Last night, about eight o'clock, Blanche

had gotten a telegram. She had not stayed up to bother him with it last night, but this morning she pushed the slitted envelope out for him to read.

"No, it's not about Cliff. It's about Mama," she said.

Mr. Blair had sent it from Gloriona. It read, "Your mother taken to Memorial Hospital in Rayo possible heart attack letter following."

For a moment Roy forgot about studying Blanche's face to see if Velma had passed on what her husband "knew". His mother had sent him more than one five dollar "loan". These little bills included in the folds of her letters were what had enabled him to lead an unstinting life through the summer. August, and his first governmental paycheck were not yet here. Yes, by counting pennies and by begging at the personnel office for advances he could get by until his own money came in, but the thought that he might have been the cause of his mother having a heart attack was terrible to bear. Over and over he read the words, "possible heart attack". The word "possible" stuck in his mind and caused him to whisper it out loud.

Blanche must have caught the whisper, but she kept on preparing breakfast. There must be some reason why she was not explaining more. Surely she had called to Gloriona last night as soon as she had gotten the wire. Blanche would not neglect sickness. The minute anyone's health was in danger she stopped everything to help out.

But now she was pouring grease from the bacon and muttering something about not being able to use the oven this morning to make buttered toast.

While he was still looking at the word "possible" she handed

him the butter dish and said, "I had to put the bread in that silly electric toaster. You'll have to butter it yourself. When I turned on the oven this morning I smelled gas leaking some where in the kitchen. Yes, the blue flame popped on in the oven, but a leak was still getting out some place. I didn't dare keep it turned on. I'll have to call Mr. Carnes and see if he has time to come over and fix it today. Did you fellows get in early last night?"

Roy looked at his sister closely. Was she playing games with him? Was she making him as uncomfortable as possible, first by refusing to explain more about the telegram, and then by hinting that she would have to call up the awful Art Carnes? He remembered that Skirvin's gas range only looked new. It was not. He had heard Cliff and Blanche telling how Art Carnes had found it for them at a bargain price, something an appliance company had repossessed. Something else about Carnes promising to fix it himself if it went wrong. He had worked for a hardware firm when he was going to college.

But why didn't she explain about their mother? He would have to bring the subject up himself.

"Have you called Mr. Blair?" he asked.

Blanche was moving rapidly around the range. Even though it was Saturday morning and she had no classes she went about her household chores as though she must rush to get them done. She was a woman who could not relax. Spare time was a dangerous vacuum that must be filled quickly, so she always kept a long list of projects to attack in periods of lull.

She put and eggs and bacon in her brother's plate, took a breath, and pushed at her forehead as though to remove stray

hair. The truth was it was only a nervous gesture. She had fixed her hair perfectly the first thing on arising.

"Roy, we have to talk about money matters," she said.

"Money matters?" What did she mean? Had she telephoned to Oklahoma and discovered that their mother was facing an enormous hospital bill? Or was this a very round about prelude to asking what he had done with the twenty-five dollars. What a fool he had been to send that money to a man he hardly knew. But it seemed like such a romantic gesture at the time, giving away everything he owned to show he could not stand being dropped completely. If they were about to speak about this then the very mildest thing he could hear would be, "You've shown the wildest sort of immaturity." But much worse than his immaturity would come out.

When his sister answered his question her voice was still composed. Blanche was not twisting her napkin nor jabbing at the butter dish with her knife. From all outward appearances she was nothing worse than slightly annoyed. But this could be the lull before the storm.

"Yes, money matters," she said. "I don't want to nag. For one thing I'm too busy for that. There's my school teaching job. I have to think about moving to Colorado in little more than a month. There's the house to keep up, the garden to care for, and life must go on here in the community. Our mother being sick is something added to this. I want you to try to realize that looking after Mama is as much your problem as it is mine."

She stopped to eat her toast and eggs, a convenient pause in which Roy should ask another question. He decided it would be bad strategy to do so. True, it seemed the conversation

was directed away from Larry Thorpe and aimed at their mother. But conversational drifts can veer about in an instant. He nibbled on his toast and kept quiet.

Things had been going so well between him and his sister for several weeks. Now, this morning, he was back to the same crossroads he had faced when he moved in with Blanche. If she pushed him too far he must leave.

Leaving would be very hard. It would not be a matter of striking out to roam the country as he had once imagined. It could mean that he would have to stop eating breakfast in the middle of a bite, walk back to the porch and pack his things while his sister screamed his faults at the top of her voice. It could mean that he would have to spend the weekend in the cheapest sort of flop house until he could get to the personnel office Monday morning and ask for another advance. And what would he write his sick mother?

He kept quiet, and Blanche kept quiet. After eating one egg she spoke. "Brother Gallagher plans to come by tomorrow after his church services. I'm giving him the corn and tomatoes in our garden. I won't have time to can them myself, and Mrs. Gallagher will put them up and give them to Georgia."

"Brother Gallagher?"

"You know. The minister out at Pristine. I wonder if you could plan to be here tomorrow and help him pick the tomatoes?"

"Yes."

Silence for a few more moments and a few more mouthfuls. It was Blanche who broke the deadlock. "The money matters we have to talk about concern telephone calls. I made one call to Rayo last night, and we should put in another one to Gloriona this morning. There may be other calls and other expenses in

connection with Mama's sickness.

"Fortunately, Mama doesn't have a heart attack as that telegram said. She's got diabetes. I don't know how much it will cost to get her back on her feet, but the nurse I talked to last night seemed to think she could keep on teaching school this fall. Surely she's got enough saved up to pay for this one night in the hospital and whatever tests they've run. Unless you've drained her dry. Roy, how much money has she sent you this summer?"

A sudden question. And just as suddenly Roy decided to be honest. His mother was sick. He was in trouble with Carnes. It would not help his conscience to lie, so he told her. "Fifteen dollars."

"Fifteen." Blanche sucked in her breath. "Fifteen, and I thought it was only ten. "Well, I won't ask you what you've spent it on. But there's no reason at all why you can't help out if any expenses crop up with Mama. There's three of us children. Rena's husband and my husband are adults earning money. If anything really expensive comes along, of course we will bear the brunt of it. But you are earning money too. And on little things like phone calls I think you should help out. Now then. last night the nurse at Rayo told me they would be releasing Mama early this morning. That Mr. Blair promised to come and pick her up. She ought to be back in Gloriona by eleven. We must call her by noon to find out exactly what happened. I think you should pay for that phone call."

What a relief. The Carnes business had not come up at all. Of course he would pay for this morning's phone call. It wouldn't be over a dollar or two. He told Blanche she was silly to make

such a fuss over a little amount like this. What else had she learned when she called last night? It now seemed obvious that she had called someone as soon as she had gotten the telegram.

Yes, Blanche had called the hospital in Rayo last night, and had been unable to get anyone but the nurse in charge of their mama's ward. She was in a ward, not a private room. "I'm disgusted with this Mr. Blair," she said. "From what the nurse told me any doctor in Gloriona could have revived Mama. But, apparently he lost his head when Mama fainted, and all he could think of was, 'hospital'. I can see him now, driving like lightning all the way down to Rayo just because there's no sign of a clinic with beds in Gloriona. So Mama is stuck with a hospital bill. There's also the tests they gave her to find out what it was. I know it's scarey to think that the rest of her life she'll have to take insulin shots, but people with that stuff do manage to live almost normal lives. It's not as bad as heart trouble."

Again Blanche raked her hands over her hair as though brushing a great many things away. She had eaten only one egg. Now she arose to put her breakfast dishes away. "There's no coffee this morning," she said. The percolator's out of whack. I hate to call Art to fix that too. Last night Zelma told me he was going to be busy this week end. But we'll have to get him over here to look at this stove. Can you smell any gas now?"

Roy could not. Blanche stepped over to the range to sniff at the oven. She was not as composed as she was pretending to be. Since taking her new job she had been careful to



look neat and efficient at all times. The job had given her morale and her self-confidence a boost, but it had not erased the fact that she was missing her husband. Ever since he had left she had been tense. Never once had she unwound and relaxed.

Now she was filling the sink preparing to wash her own breakfast dishes. Roy, himself, had hardly started to eat. If Cliff had been here he would have reminded his wife it was not polite to leave the table before all were finished. But now she seemed not to notice that she had breached a minor rule of etiquette.

"Something like this was bound to happen," she said absent mindedly. "Mama will never listen to reason. She cannot look ahead and see what old age has in store for her. Working for those Blairs this summer was the craziest thing she could do. Now we don't know what made her pass out. Was she out in her room? Was she in the kitchen? I'll bet anything she was fluttering around that old lady. I wonder why Mr. Blair was the one to send the telegram. From what I can make out that wife of his is plenty able to do it. It would have looked better if she had. We don't know if he sent another telegram to Rena and Hollis in Oklahoma City. It's not likely he spent money on two telegrams. When we call her at noon today we'll have to find out if he's contacted Rena. If he hasn't that will mean another phone call we'll have to make. I suggest we split the cost of that one in half."

Blanche was in such a distracted mood she didn't even finish washing her own dishes before she jumped into something else to do--contacting Mr. Carnes.

When she phoned them a neighbor girl answered the call

and said the man and lady of the house were out, "--shooting at the backyard fence." Was it important enough to call one of them to the phone?

The girl must have meant that Mr. and Mrs. Carnes were having target practice, and Blanche told her no, "Only leave a message to call Mrs. Skirvin. My gas oven isn't working right."

Several minutes passed and no call came in. Blanche went about her housework in her quick methodical way. From time to time she would pause to glance at the clock or look at the phone. Twice her eyes met Roy's, but neither time did she let her glance linger long enough to convey any special meaning. As minutes ticked by a vague frown puckered up her forehead. Impatiently, she said to her brother, "Roy, let's light that oven again. I could have been smelling things. Let's make sure something's wrong before we go any further."

But as soon as she turned the knob they smelled gas whether the oven lit or not. After several such tests Blanche turned the thing off for good. "I remember working for the Morrises in Grass Prairie. The neighbors next door had trouble like this. One day the man came in and lit a cigarette. Their whole kitchen blew up. Glass sprinkled the side of Morrises' house. It knocked the neighbor all the way out to his porch. I'm afraid to mess with this oven until we can get someone trustworthy to look at it."

Time drug on. They were almost through straightening up the house. Blanche had quit looking at the telephone entirely. Once she went over to the percolator, picked it up and peered at it. "I wonder if you could try taking this thing apart," she said to Roy. It looks like the Carneses aren't going to

call. Don't go so far that you tear it up, but maybe it's just a wire jerked loose."

Roy eagerly went to work on the percolator. Anything to make it unnecessary to contact the Carneses again. The more hours and days he could put between the 'possum hunt and the next confrontation with Art the more likely that man would get cold feet about spreading gossip. A few things besides time worked in Roy's favor. Carnes would be bucking a relative of Cliff's, one of his long-time friends. Also the Skirvins were a couple who had gained considerable respect in the community. Stories about such a family might not be believed. The person who spread them would run the risk of cheapening himself instead of the party he talked about.

Something else might be on his side too. Carnes did not "know" anything for sure. Roy had had sense enough not to admit sending twenty-five dollars, in fact, not to admit anything. Carnes could only blab what he had heard from Georgia.

But he had to admit that right there he was touching a weak link in the chain. What had Larry Thorpe told his wife when they had their argument? What do husbands and wives throw at each other when they are so mad they can't think clearly? Again, Roy wished he had had sense enough not to do that thing with a stranger he had never seen before. If he could come out of this with his reputation intact he would certainly be more cautious in the future.

He could not find anything wrong with the percolator. The hands of the clock were nearing eleven. Blanche reminded him they should be calling Gloriona in a few minutes. It would show they cared for her if they could contact their mama within a few minutes

of the time the Blairs brought her home from the hospital.

The frown had disappeared from Blanche's face, and although she was working furiously at cleaning the house she seemed composed, like a woman who had made up her mind about something. "If you can't spot anything wrong with that contraption," she said, "forget it. And as far as the oven goes we can make-do with cold cuts until Monday when I can call a plumber from downtown."

What did she mean? Was Blanche backing out from calling Carnes because she sensed something in the air? Had she overheard some remarks and was now fitting two and two together? Or was she merely being cautious about asking too many favors of a friend?

It was impossible to tell. Just like last night when it was impossible to tell how much Elmore knew. Whatever was up Roy decided it was to his advantage to keep this matter unmentioned. What good would it do to confess? No one could help him out, least of all his sister.

He was asking the operator to place a person to person call to Mrs. Hattie Grover in Gloriona, Oklahoma. This was more sensible than putting in a call to the Blair phone number. If she weren't back from the hospital or if she were too sick to come to the phone they would be able to hear the operator finding out this information before they had actually run up a bill.

Hattie was available. With Blanche standing as close as possible to the ear phone they heard Mr. Blair's rich, frinedly voice tell the operator, "Just a minute, I'll have to call her in."

Blanche whispered, "What does he mean, 'call her in'?"

Have they stuck her back in that maid's room when she's hardly out of the hospital?"

Seconds ran into minutes, and finally they heard their mother's voice say, "Hello", and the operator say, "Go ahead, Sir."

Her voice sounded so old. When she said, "Is that you, Roy?" her words drug out as though she were an old grandma yelling from a crank type phone far and away back in the hills. Grover was also aware of her slight difference in accent, and it came home to him that his short stay in Fort Boomer had brought many changes. Now, even his way of speaking was different.

Mrs. Grover had spoken only a few sentences before Blanche's reserve broke down. Up until then she had been the sensible daughter keeping a cool head while she tackled several emergencies at once. But all at once she took the receiver out of Roy's hand and said, "Oh, Mama, is that you? It's so good to hear your voice. Are you all right? What happened? Is this stuff you've got serious?"

Hattie spoke with her slow voice and said, "I feel pretty good, at least better than I did yesterday," and, "Oh, they say I should perk up in a few days, and I can teach school this fall," and, "I guess I was lucky they found out about this trouble before it really got out of hand."

They had to pull it out of her sentence by sentence just what had happened. Yesterday Mrs. Blair was feeling poorly, a day when she was having fainting spells. Mama was helping her rise up from bed and slip into a bathrobe, and then, "--I don't know just what happened, but everything started spinning around, and the next think I knew I woke up down at that clinic

in Rayo. It was real lucky that Mr. Blair happened to be sitting in the front room when I passed out."

Their mother was quick to shift the questioning so she could find out about them. "How are you folks getting along? I think of my children all the time. Have you heard from Cliff lately? I think of him all the time too."

Blanche assured her everyone was fine, and that Cliff was holding up well, and that she was looking forward to being with him in Colorado in a little more than a month. "But it's you we're thinking of. Are the Blairs taking good care of you? Have they stuck you out in that room by the garage? Did they call Rena or Hollis in Oklahoma City? Will the Blairs let you spend the rest of the summer at their house?"

"Oh, yes, I'll keep on working here through August," said Hattie. "Mrs. Blair has been pretty nice about me getting sick. She's letting me take it easy for a few days until these insulin shots and a new diet get me back on my feet. No, I don't think anyone has called Rena." Then she hurried to speak of something that seemed important to her. "Say, I wanted to ask about the Morrises coming to visit you the last of August. I always liked that family. I wonder if I could come down to see you while they are there. It's been so long since I've talked to anyone from Grass Prairie. If I get to come down it will mean I will have a short little break before school starts in Spetember."

Blanche told her of course she could come. It would be no trouble at all for her to visit while the Morrises were in Fort Boomer. Yes, it would be good to talk over old times at Grass Prairie. And she promised to call Rena just as soon as she and Roy hung up.

The call had drug on so long that Roy was beginning to worry about the bill he had promised to foot. The operator had given her three minute warning long ago, and it was with relief that he told his mother he was fine and promised to behave himself and got to hang up.

When they called the operator to find out how much the talk with their mother had cost they were both chagrinned to learn it was nearly four dollars. Blanche immediately offered to pay half of that since the bill was so steep, and if they should run over three minutes while talking to Rena she would pay for all the overage.

Their call to Oklahoma City caught Rena in the midst of a luncheon she was giving for a group of University graduates who had just been inducted into the army. They were doctorates, like Hollis, and were about to be sent to various scattered destinations.

"Oh, poor Mama," said Rena when she learned about Hattie. "Hollis," she called to someone in the distance, "get on the other extension. It's important."

Another extension? Did Rena have a phone with two outlets in her own house? And she was giving a "luncheon"? Just the name of it sounded sophisticated, and Roy could hear the sound of symphonic music in the background. They must own a phonograph with a collection of classical records.

Hollis broke in to express his deepest sympathy for "Mom", as he called Mrs. Grover. Neither he nor Rena showed any signs of hurrying to get the necessary news through cheaply. Apparently long distance calls did not impress them. Rena first expressed great shock to learn that her mother had an incurable disease,

but she could not hold that mood very long. She seemed compelled to talk about more pleasant things.

"Roy," she said, "I hear you want to major in dramatics this fall. Oh, how wonderful! It's swell. Just think of the new vistas that will open up for you. Such a thrilling learning experience--"

Blanche cut her off short and tried to get back to Mama. Rena, however, wanted to get back to "learning experiences", and she began telling about the one she and Hollis were facing. "We're being entrained for Philadelphia day after tomorrow. Just think of it, a new orientation in a great and historic city. And Hollis's work will be so challenging--research on hysteria among the new draftees--"

Hollis broke in from the extension phone to say, "Please, the word, 'hysteria', is no longer used."

"We do wish we could get to see Mama before we leave. But we have only one day left. Fortunately Hollis is an army man now, a Captain, and all of our things are being packed and shipped for us. Still we couldn't possibly get down to Gloriona tomorrow. Even though some poor little privates will do our packing we have to stay here and watch them do it. I promise to call Gloriona the minute you hang up. Roy, again, my deepest congratulations on your choice of majors."

That call had run on to three dollars and fifty cents. This outlay of phone bills was putting Blanche in a bad humor. "I suppose Hollis and Rena have fallen into a good thing. But they are still just kids, and all these softs things done for them doesn't seem quite right."

The next day Mr. Gallagher did not come by to pick up



the corn and tomatoes destined for Georgia. But the offer was not shunned. It was just that he was too busy to handle it personally. So he sent some local children down on horseback, four children on three horses. They brought a tow sack for the corn and a paste board box for the tomatoes.

The largest of this quartette was a girl about fourteen. She seemed perfectly at home on the bay mare she was riding and insisted a ten mile jaunt on horseback was nothing for her. The other three kids were not related. They merely went to the same church. "Everybody up in Pristine are helping Georgia out," she explained. "Brother Gallagher is going to be busy all evening collecting quilts and blankets for her. He told us to explain that to you. He said we were supposed to be real helpful, but not to tromp down your vines and things."

The children pitched in to help Roy and Blanche pick the tomatoes and gather the corn. The girl was very impressed with the garden's lushness. Even the large box of tomatoes and the sack of corn would not make a big dent in the abundance of things just coming into ripness. The girl wondered what Mrs. Skirvin would do with all of it. "I hear you're going to be moving away. Can you take all this with you some how?"

Blanche said no, but she would find a useful way to get rid of all of it. The girl was quite talkative, and it was easy to drag out news from her about Mrs. Thorpe. "Georgia and her husband are going back together," she said as though this were a great developement that must be passed on to the world. "Mr. Gallagher fixed it up yesterday. Saturday he went all the way down to San Antonio and talked to Mr. Thorpe. It's all settled. Georgia can move her family down there and be with him while

he's in boot camp. That'll be about two months. Then they're going to move him some where else. Mr. Gallagher's fixed it up so Georgia can follow him on to wherever that is too. Maybe it's a good thing all their stuff burnt up, because they'll be moving around so much."

She also told news about the 'possum hunt. James lived in Pristine, and he and his dad were building a cage for the female 'possum and the five half-grown ones. "Everybody in Pristine have been around to look at them. They've all uncurled and are hiding up in a peach tree. James has got collars and ropes on them so they can't run away. Nobody's gotten them to eat anything yet. Do you think they'll die?"

When the two containers were full the girl very skillfully roped the box of tomatoes to the back of her saddle and put the sack of corn on another horse behind the larger of the two boys. The smaller boy and the little girl she put together on the third horse, and off they went for the long trip back to the Gallagher parsonage. It wouldn't matter if the tomatoes arrived slightly squashed because the parson's wife would can them tonight. They wanted to get all the donations for Mrs. Thorpe together as soon as possible because Georgia was hoping to get off to San Antonio to join her husband by Tuesday. The girl waved goodbye as she and her caravan disappeared down the street.

That night Roy wondered if Mr. Gallagher had really been busy this Sunday afternoon, or had he sent the children down as substitutes so he could avoid confronting him and Blanche. There was no way to know for sure. But two days had passed since Friday night's "expose", and nobody had openly said or done anything.

That was fine. Just let things stay quiet. In only a few more weeks he would be out of River Terrace.

In fact now he felt happier when he was down at the base checking loads of gravel than he did evenings when he was at home. The hot dusty work was a prolonged anesthetic that kept his mind befogged during most of the daylight hours. And when he got home he could use the excuse of tiredness to keep from taking part in the life in the neighborhood. As soon as he reached the house he took a bath, then worked in the garden, often at a break neck pace, until the sun was completely set. After supper he could kill time packing tools in the garage. At an early hour he could curl up on his cot on the back porch, listen to the leaves of the cottonwood trees in the yard next door and drift off to sleep.

One day in early August a heavy rain drenched the whole area. Down town streets were flooded, and much of the low ground at the air base was left in an unpassable condition. Near the gravel pit dangerous gulleys were washed in the ruts that the heavy dump trucks had pounded all summer long. Mr. Gates, always something of an alarmist, predicted that half of the "flimsy berry crates they're calling a camp will wash away. The other half will leak like sieves."

But the truth was the buildings on the base, all now nearing completion, held up better than the drainage system did. The lashing rain had shown that the surveyors, not the carpenters, had under estimated the local weather, and it was the crews with the tranist and rod who were called back to do their work over.

This brought Art Carnes down to the gravel pit area. He showed up driving a green pickup truck, and all day long he

sped back and forth getting men and equipment in the right places.

The first time he passed the chit shack Gates waved at him, a friendly little toss of the index finger, but Carnes did not return the greeting. His gaze was off in the distance as though he were tackling matters so weighty he couldn't bother to fool with chit checkers. Gates didn't seem to mind this oversight. Some supervisors waved, others didn't. That was the way things in a big organization went. But Carnes's appearance made Roy uneasy. He knew good and well Art had not been too busy to return a greeting. He was snubbing Grover.

The fact that Gates had waved at him was even more disturbing. He had not known Pearly and Carnes were well enough acquainted to exchange greetings. And now Roy had to face the fact that gossip might spread out of the River Terrace area and down to his immediate boss.

If it did, what would Gates do? Would he become sulky and silent? Would he start picking at Roy's work to find errors? Would he challenge Grover outright to tell what he knew about the matter?

Roy was still convinced that whatever happened he must keep a cool head. The worst thing he could do was let them think he was on the run. Maybe he was not acting right by holing up in the house when he came home evenings. Maybe he should try to get back with the Cub Scouts again. Maybe he should even be brave enough to go down to the River Terrace Coffee Shop and eat a hamburger.

In the early afternoon Carnes had whizzed passed the shack for the fourth or fifth time (never once looking at the occupants). Gates, of course, no longer waved, but he followed the pickup

with his eyes. "See that red-headed man in the green pickup?" he said to Roy. "Some feller. Last January when operations first started up he put in the sewers down her on the lower end of the camp. Quite a man. How tall would you judge him to be? Six one, six two? Whichever it is he's all muscle, no fat, no flabby stuff any where."

An hour or so later Carnes passed again, and Gates continued his comments about him. "Some man. Right at the top of physical form. Why, Roy, you ought to know old Carnes. He lives out close to where you do. Maybe if you get on his good side you could end up with a better job than peggin' chits."

Roy remained silent, something he should not have done. It caused Pearly to look at his face to see why. But if he saw something there he didn't comment on it. Gates's mind often got stuck on one subject which he would bring up off and on all day long. Today he was on Carnes's qualities as a man.

"Used to be a woman working over in the payroll office," he said. "She was stuck on him. I could tell she was because every time he would come to get his crew's checks she would sort of suck in her breath and ease from one foot to the other. I don't think she ever made out with him though. Old Art ain't the type to flirt around."

Towards quitting time, when Carnes's pickup had again passed, Gates came out with a slightly more juicy story, one that he had probably been building up to all day. It only indirectly related to Carnes, but it was about illicit passion, a subject Pearly brought up every chance he got. "Last winter, when every body was working down here on the lower end, the contractors drug a

little trailer house over to that rise. They had a Mexican girl selling sandwiches in it. Prettiest figure you ever saw. Well, Carnes had a strapping boy about eighteen years old working on his crew, a kid who used to play football in highschool. He joined the navy last May. Well, one day we heard Lupita screaming and hollering to Carnes. He left the trailer and came back in about an hour. She began screaming again. By quitting time it was out all over camp. Lupita wanted Carnes to do something about that football kid. She claimed he had made her pregnant. The boy denied it. Carnes fired him any way. A couple of days later the contractors moved the trailer out. Somebody said Lupita went back to El Paso, and some said she went all the way to California. Pretty bad a woman gettin' in a fix like that. Not as bad for a Mexican as for a white, but bad any way."

Why did every one have to talk about sex? And if sex it must be why did they always talk about someone in a mixed up mess?

Old Pearly was now looking far out toward the horizon.. Maybe his mind was floating through the clouds, but it might be floating down the gutter. What goes on in other people's minds? Maybe Carnes's story had already reached Gates, and it had worked him up so much that he had to pop off, and this routine story of backyard fornication was the bravest he could get..

Roy shifted from one foot to the other. He also sucked in his breath. Probably he was behaving as suspiciously as that woman in the payroll office had done when Carnes walked in.

This man Carnes was weighing on his mind. He was so confusing. His own sister and brother-in-law liked him. People

such as Gates thought he was good-looking. To Roy he was loathesome.

No, even the loathesomeness was mixed up and confused. There was no denying Art was handsome. Perhaps that was why he was also loathesome, someone attractive who had been poison from the very beginning.

Could he do something to get himself out of this fix? Just drop the whole idea that he was homosexual? Maybe he had been wrong when he read the nude magazine and calssified himself as queer. But everything had fitted so well, the text, the pictures, the whole aura of that pulpy little sheet was like seeing your own face in a mirror or running across your own handwriting in a bag full of signatures.

But as far as he was concerned there was nothing wrong with him. He was built just like all the other boys. He liked to hear and tell dirty jokes about fornication. When the high-school boys whispered in corners about making such and such a girl he would get as worked up, it seemed like, as any of them. He was always spinning day dreams about sexual intercourse, just like the other boys.

Just like them? Maybe not quite. In fact he knew for sure it wasn't quite. The day dreams he had were always about two other people doing it, not himself at all. When he projected himself into the story he would do so by turning the girl into him. Then it would be just two men, himself and another one.

But he might break himself from this habit. Maybe he could get himself into the picture by erasing the other man. Then he would surely be just like the others.

He began to switch from one foot to the other so fast that



Pearly asked what was the matter.

"Oh nothing," he said. "It's stuffy in here. We couldn't take out one of these windows, could we?"

"What's the matter with you? Both of them are already out. I lifted them out of their groove this morning."

"Oh. Well, there aren't any trucks coming right now. I think I'll walk around outside."

Outside everything was covered with fine, powdery silt, the river bottom kicked up by the trucks and parched by the zenith sun. Dust or no dust the outdoors was better than the inside of that gloomy little shack with walls so close together you felt like thrashing them apart with your hands so you could have room to breathe. The trouble was he was imagining people were talking about him.

Oh, but there was no imagining to it. They were. The reason Carnes had jumped on him was he had let himself get to careless, too smart. The way he had been flirting right and left someone was bound to take him down a peg. He must learn to be careful.

A few days later he was riding on the city bus, the leg of his trip home which took him from the lake to the down town corner where he changed buses. A new driver was on duty, one with a bald head.

Roy had been staring at his bald head a long time, and his mind was beginning to make up elaborate stories about it. People were dead wrong about bald heads. They were attractive instead of embarrassing. Those jokes about men sinking good money on useless hair restorers must be wrong. This bus driver, for example, was quite good-looking, and you could tell his



lack of a part didn't bother him at all. The only problem with baldness would be getting your hair to thin out in an attractive pattern. This fellow had a few sprigs left in the center front that he would be better off not to have. Larry Thorpe's hair line had receded exactly right.

Roy squirmed in his seat. The bus was so hot. So many people were getting on. And he had let his mind wander again into forbidden paths. Bald heads should not interest adolescent boys.. Bald heads had led him to thinking of Larry Thorpe. Larry Thorpe had gotten him into trouble.. A few days ago he had resolved to force himself to think of women. Their breasts, for example. Men were always drooling about tits, and to him they were awkward things. Women must always be finding that they are getting in the way.. Men's nipples, on the other hand, were--

Never mind this. He must look around for an attractive woman.

The bus was so sweltering he wanted out of it. A woman was sitting across from him. Forty with a large bossom. Stiffling hot inside the bus. The palms of his hands and his arm pits were getting soaked with sweat. The woman was glaring at him. Maybe he had a wild look in his eye. With difficulty he restrained the impulse to pull the cord, get off at the next stop and rejoice in a breath of fresh air.

No, he must control himself. How ridiculous to let something as ordinary as a bossom get him upset. And how pointless it would be to jump off the bus for no reason. Thirty minutes before the next one came along. A useless delay. Blanche would wonder what had happened to him.

He placed the palms of his hands on his knees and looked down at the floor. In this way he controlled himself. When he got off the bus for his down town transfer he purposefully ogled a slender girl who had set her hair in beautiful blonde waves. He forced himself to notice her small breasts.

Instantly she turned and glared at him. But at the same time she lifted her shapely hand to her curls and brushed one of them behind her ear.

Certainly she was pretty. She posed like a movie star on a magazine cover. Ah yes, flirting was easy. And without lying to himself he knew he was attracted to her. He let his mind expand on this initial spark of attraction. He would build it into a sex dream.

How terrific it would be to take her to an expensive restaurant like the ones Claudet Colbert went to in films. He would be walking with her between the tables, soft carpets. He would be pulling out her chair for her. With great poise she would sit. Music would come from a hidden spot in the wall. As they exchanged small talk a waiter would come to take their order. The waiter presents an over sized menu with a sophisticated black and silver cover. As he unfolded it in front of Roy it would be possible to notice the hair on the back of his hands.

Hair? A male waiter? He was on the wrong track again. For one thing, never in his life had he been to a restaurant where men waited tables. The fact that he saw such things in movies was no excuse. Cut the men out.

He looked around to find the girl with the blonde waves and discovered while day-dreaming he had let her slip completely away. Oh well, maybe it was just as well. If he had continued

to ogle her she might slap his face. Girls in movies did that.. This was something else he could not understand. Why would any man be so clumsy as to provoke a woman into slapping his face? His own experience had been that girls were no trouble at all to get along with, that is in places like restaurants and school rooms.

Restaurants. The blonde would order, and the music that he had previously placed as coming from the walls would now be coming from a sizable orchestra in the back. Other couples would get up to dance, and so would this blonde. She would have on a stylish evening gown in black georgette, like the scraps in the cellar. Gold pumps, like the hardware on the orange atomizer--and Clark Gable would come along and swoop her into a slinky rumba--

Roy gasped and blotted the image out of his mind. He, himself, was supposed to swoop her into his arms, not Clark Gable.

He fidgeted on the sidewalk. Where was the River Terrace bus? Had he missed it while fooling with silly imaginings? The sidewalk was getting so crowded he wished he could hurry up and get out in the suburbs into fresh air.

Across the street from the bus stop was Woolworth's. The sales part only occupied the street floor, but above that the building arose for three more stories. On its roof was a large bill board, a fancy one with electric lights around the edges which flashed on and off even in the day time.

Two workmen had lowered a scaffold in front of the bill board and were pasting up a new add. One of the workmen paused to

push back his white painter's cap to scratch his head. Or was it to wipe the sweat from his brow? It must be extremely hot up there with the electric lights and the direct sun.

The brow which he wiped extended very far back. He was bald.

In addition to that the picture they were pasting up was a beach scene with a bald headed man lifting up a glass in a toast. His muscular shoulders were bronzed with sun tan. In the background you caught a bit of an umbrella, some sand and the suggestion of surf. His broad shoulders were covered only with the thin straps of a striped swim shirt. His hairy arm was holding up something, perhaps a stein of beer or even a soft drink. Roy didn't bother to notice. Giving in completely to his inner urges he decided to stare at this grand, over done man.

Ah, it was a relief to do so. Enough of this chastizing himself. The sidewalk no longer seemed crowded, and the sun was not hot. He stood there and stared.

Several cars in the street were stopping for the traffic light. Roy's powerful reverie was broken by hearing a woman laugh--"Yeee, hee, hee hee!"

Women were always laughing, but this laughter had a taunting quality to it. There was no fun in it at all. Roy was aware that several people were looking out at the stopped traffic to see who was making this discordant noise. Grover looked also.

The woman was in the front seat of a tan DeSoto, an expensive looking model, too expensive to match the three working class persons inside. Driving the DeSoto was a middle-aged man who looked like an oil field rough-neck dressed up in a cheap suit for a week long spree.

Another woman, pretty with large breasts, was crammed into the front seat beside him. Neither she nor the driver were doing the laughing. Both were staring at Roy, a funny look on their faces. As soon as the driver caught Roy's eye he turned back quickly to look at the traffic. The girl with the large breasts frowned and began examining the nail polish on her fingers.

The front seat was just wide enough to accomodate a second woman. Apparently the rough-neck had two of them on his string and had pushed them both in the front seat. The one nearest the window had small black eyes, and her gaze was boring into Roy's forehead. She was the one doing the jeering.

Roy had never seen her before. Before he let himself get uncomfortable he must make sure that she wasn't putting the beady eye on someone behind him. After all, he had been letting his imagination get out of hand, fancying that his "queerness" was as visible as a white shirt. He turned and looked behind him, and the woman cackled that much harsher. She was managing to make it very obvious that she meant Roy and only him. When he turned back to face her she locked eyes with him, and her hoots rose up an octave higher.

Her hair was as black as her eyes, a little too long to be fashionable. Once she had had a permanent, but most of it was gone. Her lean face had a hard, competent look. Her suit-like dress, while not shabby, had a practical cut to it. She was a woman who would go to a certain amount of trouble to follow fashion, but would not over do it. A cafe waitress? No, not the restaurant type, a grubby little diner, one in which she

would have been slinging hash for about twenty years. Maybe she had been forced to make ends meet by shadier practices.

The traffic light changed. The rough-neck drove his car forward, but the woman poked her head out the window so she could laugh at Roy all the way down the block to the next stop light. It was red, and the DeSoto stopped again. The brunette kept up her cackle and her bullet gaze. Only when the signal turned green and the car moved out of hearing did she stick her head back inside.

The feeling of relief that Roy had felt from openly staring at the man on the billboard vanished. Again the sidewalk seemed crowded and the sun hot.

Now he didn't have to imagine people were staring at him. They were. A young man in work clothes standing on the curb. A whore jeering at him from a car window. Someone sniggered.

If they really knew why she had given him the horse laugh they might do something besides snigger. Where had she come from? A friend of Zilla's? To her, of course, twenty-five dollars in a letter would mean only she had found a sucker who was willing to overpay the price of prostitution.

That twenty-five dollars. Everybody was getting the wrong idea about it. He had sent it because of a much more far-fetched dream than buying a blow job. Rather it was something like a millionaire leaving all his wealth to a penniless person. Only Roy's entire wealth was limited to twenty-five dollars. Now the idea seemed silly even to him. He was learning. He was learning to be very careful.

Finally, he got home to River Terrace. All evening he watched Blanche to catch any signs that she might also have

heard something. But her manner gave away nothing. She appeared completely preoccupied with the pile of things she had to do before Mama and the Morrisises arrived and before she must rent the house and leave for Colorado.

He didn't know what to think of her poker face and her big show of being so busy she couldn't relax. She might really be that rushed, or it might be a put-on. It left him up in the air. He didn't know where he stood.

Just how would Blanche take news of a scandal like this? Two months ago when he first came to live in her house she had been fearless about reforming his every little weakness. When she found out about this new "big" weakness would she launch a reform movement equally as fearlessly? Or would she behave just as she was doing now, pretend she hadn't heard?

He himself couldn't decide which would be the easier behavior for him to face. If she got nasty he would grit his teeth, say nothing and leave. Breaking up the family, especially with Mama about to make a visit, would be bad. But at least it would show he was independent enough to strike out on his own, and maybe a year or so from now Blanche would apologize, and the family could get back together again. The worst would be over, and they would have a better understanding of each other's metal.

Where as this pretending nothing had happened had its draw backs. It might mean they could get through Mama's visit without a big row. But sooner or later the subject would have to come up. Pretending it didn't exist merely postponed the matter.

The weather was so hot he had a nosebleed shortly before



he went to bed. Blanche insisted he keep an ice pack by his cot in case it should start up again in the middle of the night. Fortunately, it did not. But even so, he still had trouble sleeping. Along toward mid-night he rolled up some blankets and spread a pallet on the lawn in the middle of the back yard. The night air was so still it could not even shake the leaves on the cottonwood trees next door. Finally he drifted off to sleep.

Two mornings later, when the sun was scarcely up, he was walking over to catch the bus when a car drove up and stopped beside him. It was Mrs. Carnes in their new Pontiac. Its freshly waxed body and vestigial running board rested only a few inches from him.

"Could I give you a ride down town?" she asked.

What an unexpected surprise. He didn't know what to do. Why was she out at such an early hour? Everyone knew her office did not open until eight and she never left her house until a quarter after seven. The whole neighborhood also knew she seldom made the gesture of offering anyone a ride. But here she was, ready for work, clothed in conservative white linen which made her look so aristocratic.

Immediately he suspected the worst of her. Why couldn't both she and her husband leave him alone? She had deliberately sneaked up beside him with a slow running motor, a dirty trick. And she had asked to take him--not two blocks to the bus stop--but all the way down town. He was forced to make a decision in a split second's time. If she had wanted to give him a free ride why hadn't she telephoned the invitation before she left the house, and he would have had a chance to refuse. Now, if



he said, yes, he would be stuck with her for a forty or fifty minute ride. If he said, no, it would sound like he was pouting.

If only the summer were over and he were out of River Terrace so he could forget about that foolish letter he mailed to a man he hardly knew.

"Sure," he said.

What else could he say? If ever there was a time to stick by his plan to appear unconcerned this was it. She was the wife of the man who was out to get him in hot water. Who knows, she might be the real cause of the ruckus, the smart manipulator who inflamed her husband to do the dirty work. Calmness and confidence were the only sensible weapons.

He hoped his face looked cheerful as he circled behind the car to get in the front seat beside her. Immediately he must begin a pleasant conversation, because silence would indicate he was dreading the ride. He could think of nothing but the weather, so he said, "It's a scorcher, isn't it?"

She smiled at this trite attempt to make idle chatter. And as she moved the car competently down the road she brought up a more important subject, bureaucratic inefficiency.

"City Transit has made a grand mess of things, haven't they?" she said. "We tax payers will have to suffer for their dawdling. A year ago they could have bought out Jones's whole block for a thousand dollars. Now Zilla is holding them up for five times that amount, and it looks like she's going to get it. And it's the same story with all the other property they should have bought years ago. But they've put it off until land has gone sky high. After all, Fort Boomer is no

longer a country cow town. We're a city. The idea of leaving buses parked over night beside the road is ridiculous. They should have built a whole series of decent car barns five years ago when land and labor was cheap."

Roy had never heard details about the City Transit's quest for land. He had only heard that Zilla's crowd was trying to make a killing off of Jones's property. Velma's authoritative analysis of the bus line's problems was new, and a little bit disgusting, to him. It sounded like she was pretending to know more than she did. Mrs. Carnes should stick to minding her own business and leaving the city alone.

But the bus company was not all. She also had an opinion on the coming referendum to allow the sale of beer inside the city limits. Roy, himself, had only heard that such an item might be on the ballot in November, but Velma spoke as though there was no doubt about its being on the ballot nor any doubt about its winning.

"It's childish to try to keep it out any longer," she said. "Beer and drinks stronger than that are sold on all the army bases. The down town merchants might as well get their share of it. The disgusting thing is all the slick promotion that's going to come off. The breweries have hired this New York out fit to put out a lot of bally-hoo. Manfred's I think they are called. One of those smooth oily advertising firms from Madison Avenue. You've probably seen the bill board stuff they've already put up. Drinking beer on the beach. Just like soda pop and stuff like that. It's sickening. My own opinion is the poeple of Fort Boomer have enough gumption to vote it in because it will make money. That sleezy advertising is not

necessary."

Roy had never heard of Manfred's and had only vaguely heard of Madison Avenue. Nor had he associated one billboard sign with a big money campaign to win an election. Mrs. Carnes was certainly knowledgeable.

She was also pretty. Her hairdo was neither severely mannish nor girlishly fluffy. The balance between was just right. The few curls around her forehead made her complexion glow at its prettiest. Did she wear makeup? He could not be sure.

The way she sat on the car seat was perfect, neither too straight nor slumped, but relaxed the way a healthy, athletic person should sit. Her clothing followed the same idea, stylish, but comfortable.

How old was she? Roy had never thought of her age because she was a married woman who held down a prestigious job. You never expect a departmental boss to be mixed up in little games of sex. Highschool girls twittered and cooed to catch a boy friend. But surely you were safe with a confident creature like Velma.

Safe? Why should he worry about being safe? Perhaps because he had stopped to speculate how old she was. Cliff was about twenty-four. Art couldn't be more than a year older than he was. Why Velma was in her mid-twenties, not middle aged at all. Maybe she was playing a game that was more advanced than the highschool level.

He must not let himself trust her nor be captivated by her beauty. She had left home a good hour early just to pick him up. Velma would not change her routine unless there was a

reason for it. Yes, her small talk about city government implied she was not going to use crude tactics like her husband. But he could not believe she would go so far as to work against the man she had married. When a man wants to stomp you in the dirt his wife will not carry you to work as a favor.

Or maybe she will. Roy didn't know.

It would be a funny twist if Velma should try to wear the pants in this argument. It would be laughable if old Carnes carried his dramatic gossip home to his wife only to have her say, "So what?" Mrs. Carnes had a mind of her own, and she might try to smooth this matter over. She might even be the sort to go against her husband just to see him fume and snort. It would be amusing if the hot tempered Art had to put up with a mate who would seldom back him up.

But such as that was pure speculation. Right now he didn't know what Mrs. Carnes was up to. All he knew was he was riding with a beautiful woman dressed in pure white except for a blue turquoise ring. Blanche wasn't as pretty nor as confident as this creature was. What a sister Velma would make for some one. Did she have a brother?

A sister. A brother. Why did he have to think of sisters at a time like this? Come to think of it her offering him a ride was slightly degrading. He was so harmless it didn't matter whether she picked him up or not.

Suddenly she was talking about another subject. "You and Blanche don't have long to be here in River Terrace, do you?" she asked.

A month ago he could have answered a simple yes or no.

But now he was having to watch every little word to make sure he wasn't falling into a trap. What a way to live. He had better plan some way to get out of this fix.

"You haven't been very happy here, have you Roy?" she continued. River Terrace isn't quite your type of place. I mean you don't do the things the people there usually do, do you?"

He did not like for people to tell him he was unhappy. There was no way to reply to a statement like that. If you admitted it was true you were confessing you couldn't handle your affairs. If you denied it she wouldn't believe you.

"--You have broader interests, don't you?" she was saying.

He decided to deny it. "Why no. I like River Terrace very much," he said.

"Impossible. You sit at home nine-tenths of the evenings. I've never seen you going any where week ends. Blanche has kept you tied to the yard and garden, and you aren't the agricultural type at all. You came from some little town in eastern Oklahoma, didn't you? And I believe your parents are separated. It's perfectly natural that you would have a hard time adjusting. What you need is to get into something that interests you."

He replied that he did like working in the garden, but she paid no attention to him. "I hear you plan to major in dramatics this fall," she continued, and without waiting for him to confirm or deny the rumor she gave her opinion of it. "It may be good for you to spend a semester or two in that stuff until you can find yourself. The training in speaking before an audience will be quite valuable. And you are rather awkward.

If you can get a teacher that's fit for anything a drama course might help you get out of that. You've never had any dancing lessons, have you?"

What a foolish question. No one in Gloriona had ever taken dancing lessons. It was possible no one in Gloriona even knew how to dance. Drinking and dancing were things young people there did not do. But he did not have to tell her this. She told him.

"--You have to get out from that Gloriona atmosphere. It's a good thing your sistertook you as far as River Terrace, but it would have been better if you had spent the summer in one of the more sophisticated areas of Fort Boomer. Do you remember Dolores Fox?"

Dolores Fox. Fox. Malcolm Fox. Yes, he remembered that embarrassingly effeminate kid. And if Velma was trying to cure him of homosexuality she was getting on the wrong track here. It was strange that she didn't realize this. But such were the defects of people who are determined to run everything. They know nothing of their own blind spots.

"Dolores and Vinnie come from an interesting family," she said. "Examples of persons who have pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps. You would never guess that Dolores and Vinnie were both raised in Pristine. They left and since have seen much of the world. Dolores gives dancing lessons in her studio near the University. It might be possible for you to take a few before the summer is over. She's good at the Latin dances, rumbas, sambas. Her group classes in the evenings are quite reasonable, and you will have a chance to meet some very nice girls."

Some nice girls. It would do no good to tell her that he had known nothing but nice girls all his life. But at least the reason for giving him a ride was now clear. The Carneses, thanks to Velma, were going to be agreeable. They might let a little gossip spill over at the edges, but they were not going to scatter it wholesale.

He was beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel. If he behaved himself all could go well. Behaving himself meant finding some nice girls.

It might mean he would have to dance with them. That was supposed to be fun. Everyone said it was. He knew how you went about it. You held her right hand in your left and placed your other hand on her back. That would be easy enough to to learn.

But he saw no reason to rush into dancing before the summer was over, and there was certainly no reason for him to take up with Dolores and Vinnie. If he was going to turn over a new leaf their nephew must be left behind.

By the time Velma had let him out in front of Woolworth's she had changed the conversation back to more solid things. The new clover leaf system, for example, was so poorly planned it would be out of date by the time they got it finished.

Things went easier at work that day. When he got home he found two important letters for Planche, one from his mother, and one from the Morrises. It turned out both parties would arrive for a visit at about the same time. Mama said her bus would come in next Friday at noon, and the Morrises stated they would drive in early the same "evening". Mama insisted she was feeling much better since she had started taking her insulin

shots, and Mrs. Blair had been treating her with real consideration ever since she had had her "spell". Mrs. Morris explained they would not have a great deal of time to visit at Blanche's house since they would have other important things to do while they were in Fort Boomer.

Blanche was so elated to learn a definite date when her old employers would come for a visit that she hardly noticed this last part of Mrs. Morris's letter. "Just think," she said, "it will be like when we were kids. Mama and the Morrises in the same house with you and I. If only we had Rena and Papa here it would be a genuine family reunion--a little bit of Grass Prairie moved down to Fort Boomer."

The times when the two parties of guests arrived did not turn out to be quite the same as either of their letters stated. Hattie, the first to change her schedule, called up that very night to say she was forced to clear out of Gloriona. Both Blanche and Roy were in the habit of going to bed early, and just as they were making the rounds before turning out the lights Mrs. Grover's call came through.

"Something terrible has happened here," she said in an excited voice. "Mr. Blair's wife keeled over dead at the supper table--"

Roy was the one who had answered the phone, and he noticed her strange wording, Mr. Blair's wife, instead of Mrs. Blair. Then, as her story poured out, she altered her reference even more..

"--Luther is taking it very calmly, but the rest of them are just throwing fits. It's all over. It was over by the time she hit the dining room floor. There's nothing anyone



can do. The doctor has been here. They've already put a sheet over her, and the undertaker's going to be here any minute to carry her away. But some of them are still running around heating water for hot water bottles. It's over."

By now Blanche was sharing the receiver with Roy, and she tried to get Hattie to be more specific. "But why do you have to leave Gloriona?"

"I said Mrs. Blair has passed away," was her answer. Her tone indicated that should explain everything. "It wasn't cancer or her kidneys or anything we were thinking of. It was her heart. She ate too big a meal, and died in an instant. I had fixed candied sweet potatoes the way she always told me to--this summer she had put on big rolls of fat--and she tanked up on a lot of Ovaltine. She's always drinking Ovaltine. Well, she sort of belched and patted her lips with her napkin. And, blop-po, she went over backwards in her chair. Just like that. Luther and I rushed to put cold cloths on her face and stomach. But it was no use. Luther got on the phone, but the doctor was out delivering a baby. We couldn't get ahold of any doctor in town for an hour. By that time all the neighbors were in, and one of them started making nasty remarks about me. She wanted to know what I had put in the potatoes."

Hattie's voice rose to a falsetto whine as she mimicked the neighbor's words, "Sweet potatoes never bother me at all. There must have been something wrong with them." Then she dropped her tone to normal as she told how Mrs. Blair's sister drove seventy miles an hour from Rayo when Luther, Mr. Blair, called her.

"She blew in about ten minutes ago. I don't need to wait

any longer. I can tell by the look in her eye that woman will never let me spend the night here. You can't imagine how jealous some of these women are."

"What are they jealous about?" asked Blanche.

Hattie ignored the question and explained that she was having to put the call through from a friendly school teacher's house. "I've already called the bus station. If I can get packed in time I can catch one in thirty minutes that will get me in Fort Boomer at five o'clock tomorrow morning. It's the fastest schedule they've got. No lay-overs any where. Now I know five o'clock is a terrible hour to run in on you--"

"We'll be down town to meet you," said Blanche. "Just keep calm, and try to get some sleep on the bus. We don't want you keeling over with a heart attack, too."

As soon as she had hung up Blanche began to mutter. "That mother of ours is always making a mountain out of a mole hill. Get out of Gloriona. That's ridiculous. Surely some of those neighbors could have put her up for a few days. Running out so fast looks worse than if she had stayed calm."

Blanche, however, remained thoughtful and did not attempt to explain why any of her mother's actions might look bad. A time or two she smiled to herself as she wondered whether to set the alarm for three-thirty or four. She finally chose four o'clock hoping the streets at that hour would be sufficiently deserted so they could "get ready" as well as drive down town in an hour's time.

Yes, both of them must drive down to meet their mother. She, herself, did not want to be out alone at that hour of the night, nor did she want to palm the job off on to Roy. "When

Mama is being foolish we'd better face her together."

Roy began to wonder if some incident might turn up in the next few days. No, he wasn't worried that some his own escapades might come to his mother's attention. She wouldn't believe them even if someone told her to her face. But Mama, herself might stir up a row. It had been years since he had seen Mrs. Morris, but having her and Hattie Grover under the same roof didn't auger too well. And Mr. Morris would be there too. Did his mother really think old man Morris was attractive? Who knows? It had also been years since his mother had seen him, and a lot of water had run under the bridge since then.

He was beginning to realize that his mother was a natural schemer. She must have been plotting some little game in the Blair household. He could remember the many times when she would lead one of the children off to one side to "talk" to them. And in a low voice she would whisper something she didn't want the other children to know. Roy recalled it was usually something he did not want to know either. But still, his mother had so many redeeming qualities. It was pleasant to look forward to their partialy family reunion in spite of the complications that might be piling up.

It seemed they had hardly gotten to sleep before Blanche's alarm went off. They had guessed right, the streets at that hour were close to being deserted. Two heavy trucks groaned their way around one of the clover leafs, and they had to follow, for a block, a tank-truck from the street cleaning department which was sluicing water into the gutters. Other than these they met no one.

The bus station itself was almost as deserted. Only one

man was on duty at the ticket counter, and he had to double as the baggage checker. A Negroe porter whisked some cigarette butts into a dust pan. A policeman talked with an old man with a bandaged forehead who was sitting on one of the benches with a vacant look in his eyes. Out on the streets a milk delivery truck went by.

The bus came in early. The porter emptied his dust pan, put on his red cap and went out to the drive way. The ticket salesman left the front counter and took position behind the baggage claim window. That's where the in-coming load would flock to.

Was their mother the first passenger off the bus? Did she look tired and eager to meet her two children, one of which had but recently flown from the home nest? Was she apprehensive about the crisis she had just left in Gloriona, the death and the jealous innuendos that she was vaguely to blame?

No, none of these. Or if these feelings were in her mind they were well covered with some else. The expression on their mother's face was more like elation or triumph.

Hattie was in the last group off the bus. While all the others were unloading they spotted her sitting mid-way back and talking to another woman slightly younger than she. The two seemed to be having a regular gossip fest. They looked like two of the same mind who had run across each other on a trip and had hit it off immediately.

When the last of the other riders was stepping out the door Hattie paused in her conversation, looked around, twittered nervously, and they saw her lips form the words, "We are here." The two ladies leisurely arose and finished off their talk.

as they slowly edged down the aisle. It wasn't until both women had stepped down to the driveway that Mrs. Grover looked around, spotted her two children, waved happily, then turned to her friend of the moment and said, "Oh, there they are. Well, it's been so nice talking to you, and I hope everything goes well with the new grandchild."

It took a few moments for Blanche and Roy to adjust to their mother's new look. Roy had remembered her as usually wearing a clean but plain dress, often cotton print, and so faded from wear and washings that its color was a vague gray. And since she had been working all summer as a glorified maid he expected to see her mousey in both attire and demeanor. He had also been worried that her diabetic condition had left signs of fading health on her face. But he saw none of this.

The woman who confidently advanced toward her children would be distinguished looking in the best sections of Fort Boomer. Her navy blue dress and straw hat were lessons in understated chic. She held herself straight with head high and eyes shining. Her stride was as smooth and assured as a professional model's. People in the driveway were turning to look at her, trying to figure out who this distinguished matron might be. No one would ever guess she had spent her life in the backwaters of the American scene and that this was a rare trip to what might be called a sophisticated world. If anything she looked too good for Fort Boomer, more like someone from New York or even Europe. And at a bus station at five o'clock in the morning she definitely stood out from the others.

Even any signs of bad health were hard to detect. It was only when she leaned close to kiss Roy that he could tell

that her makeup had been skillfully blended to disguise a new set of saggings and wrinkles. But even at close range she did not look anything like as worn as he had expected.

"Roy and Blanche," she said. "It's so good to see you. So good to be visiting my oldest daughter in her own home. It's a terrible hour of the night, and I apologize for it. But it's best that I get down here. It looks so much better. It's great of you to come and pick me up at ten to five in the morning. Well, enough talk. Let's get my suitcases and get you people back in your bed so maybe you can get a little nap before you have to go to work."

She had brought with her three, large, bulging suitcases. They were so heavy the porter had trouble carrying them out to the car. Mrs. Grover tipped him a nickel without pausing in her chatter to her two children. She was not in the least overwhelmed at the size of Fort Boomer. Her only comment was to complain at the untidyness of the sidewalks. It wasn't until they were out on the arterial driving home that she began to notice the city. "What are those towers?" she said pointing into the gloomy night, which was now at the dark period before dawn.

"The University," Roy piped up quickly.

"The University," she echoed. "That's where you've decided to go this fall, isn't it? I'm glad you've decided to take up drama. But don't you think this little old school a way off here in Texas is a bad place to get your training?"

Blanche was driving the car. When her mother made this statement she raced the engine and shot the car forward slightly,

then quickly braked to correct her mistake. Hattie did not notice these slight changes in locomotion but kept on with her surprising advice on how to succeed in the theater. "--You have to go where professional actors are actually performing. New York or Los Angeles. Besides training you have to get to know someone. Contacts are as important as skill in a profession like that. The usual stuff, employment bureaus and recommendations, will get you no where in that field--"

Roy heard Blanche give a short, tired sigh as though she were giving up forever some cherished point. Blanche was a different woman here at the end of the summer from what she had been in early June. Or perhaps she was already writing off Roy as someone now beyond her wing of protection, and she was turning to face her new world in Colorado.

But before she drew up to her house in River Terrace she picked a little quarrel with her mother. "Why did you drag three full suitcases half way across two states? You know you won't be here but a few days until, well, until whatever it is you're ducking out on blows over."

Hattie did not actually bristle, but her reply was firm. "I'm not ducking out on anything, Blanche. You know it doesn't look good for an unrelated woman to stay on the same premises with a man who has just become a widower. I am doing what any respectable woman would do. I'm making it clear that I'm doing the right thing. I brought three suitcases because I wanted my living quarters completely cleaned out. Now then, let's talk about more pleasant things. This looks like a nice little neighborhood you live in. But, of course, it's still so dark you can't make out anything. The dwellings do look small, though.

That's certainly a dinky little blob straight ahead of us."

The dinky little blob she was peering at through the darkness was her daughter's own house.. Hattie sensed her mistake by the time the words were out of her mouth, and with only the faintest pause in breath kept on, "--I mean that one on beyond the row of cottonwoods," she said motioning on to the neighbor's house. "I suppose those half grown bushes are cottonwoods. If they're poplars you'd better watch out. Their roots will plow up your whole yard and soak up every bit of water you try to put on your lawn."

Blanche showed no signs that she had caught her mother's faux pas, but silently turned into the driveway of the house her mother had first labeled "dinky".

Hattie exclaimed at the nice color scheme in her daughter's living room and urged everyone to get to bed without talking at all. "If we get started hashing over old times you two won't get a wink of sleep before your alarm goes off."

Blanche explained that she and Roy would not try to get back to sleep. It was time for them to start fixing breakfast right now. Hattie was sorry she was turning everything upside down. She decided to sip a cup of coffee with them while they were fixing their eggs, then she herself would slip into bed.

"Where are you going to put everyone down in a house this size?" she asked. "Aren't those Morris people from Grass Prairie coming in any day?"

This sentence was almost as surprising as the one she had said about Roy's dramatic training. She was now referring to Mr. Morris as "those people". The high regard she had always had for the Grass Prairie lawyer seemed to be forgotten. In



one summer's time their mother seemed to have washed off her rural background like taking a bath. She had even gotten finicky about bedding visitors down. Blanche's sleeping arrangement would put Hattie on the back porch, Roy outside in a hammock, and the Morrises, when they showed up Friday, would be in the bedroom, and Blanche, herself, would unfold the davenport and sleep in the living room.

"There's plenty of beds," the daughter said.

"Plenty of beds?" asked Mrs. Grover. "You mean push Roy out in the back yard? I'd make that Morris crowd go to a hotel. They can afford it. As a lawyer he's being watching every foreclosure in Western Oklahoma and whisking it out from the hands of the bank before they could get to grab it. Well, it's your house. If you and Roy don't mind being scrunched up in makeshift beds I don't either."

She insisted on helping prepare the breakfast, and would not let her daughter touch the dishes when they were through. "You two go on to your jobs. Don't worry about entertaining me. Why, I've just set foot in a new town. I'll find plenty of interesting things to look at--" She was referring to Fort Boomer as a town, not a city. "--I need to do some shopping, pick up little things I'll need when school starts this fall."

For the first time she indicated her plans for the coming year were not to be changed. Naturally, she would go back to teaching school. She dropped the phrase, "for another year, anyway".

"Luther owns a little apartment building three blocks from the school," she said. "He's fixed the units up nice. I'm going to take one of them next year instead of living a way out

out in the country in that drafty old dungeon of Betty's. With Roy gone a little apartment will be quite enough for a lone school teacher like me."

Hattie did manage to take care of herself quite well during the day. When both the children got home from work they discovered their mama was not in the house. She showed up only a few moments before the evening meal.

"Pardon me for dragging in late," she said. "I had planned to break off from shopping in time to get home and help you fix dinner." She did not use the word, supper. "But I rode over ten blocks on the wrong bus. In Bernstein's they told me I could catch the River Terrace line right at the curb. How was I to know they meant the curb of Woolworth's?"

But in a whole day of shopping she had bought nothing but a picture post card which she intended to mail to a favorite student. In order to do this she had to borrow a stamp from Blanche.

In her prattle during supper she revealed her window shopping tour for day had been extensive. Not only had she looked over winter coats in Bernstein's, but she had priced Persian rugs in Child's and silver ware in Novatny's. "There's a pair of living room lamps at Child's that's as good as anything I've run across. They are the right size and are not gaudy dust catchers. Ah, but the price! Like every good stick of furniture in town they would wreck a teacher's budget for a year."

She had brought back a sheaf of leaflets advertising sales in various department stores. Hidden beneath the stack Blanche

spotted some forms. She jerked one out and saw it was an application for credit. The daughter tossed it back at the mother disgustedly. Hattie giggled, wadded up the form and dropped it in the garbage bucket. "Don't blow up," she said, "I didn't plan to use it."

Later in the evening Blanche got Roy to one side and whispered, "What has got into Mama? She wants to blow money like an oil heiress. At her age you'd think she would be more practical. I hope she's not pushing herself out on a limb."

Roy pretended he had no idea what she was talking about. He asked what kind of limb their mother could be out on.

"She's been flirting!" hissed Blanche.

Roy only said, "Oh." But secretly he was elated. Did his mother really have a chance to marry the owner of the Flower of the West mills, the man who might run for state representative?

Why not? All of her life Hattie had been living below her level of abilities. She was an attractive and intelligent woman, quite well educated with a broad outlook on life. Why shouldn't she land someone important? And the thought of having an influential step-father was nice to ponder.

But there were other aspects of the situation that fascinated him. If his own mother was getting mixed up in sex why couldn't he?

Last spring when he had left Gloriona Hattie had seemed through with men and resigned to a life of drudgery. Here at the end of the summer she shows up a changed woman. What had done it? Why, "flirting" had done it. That word might bother Blanche but to him it was exciting.

Why were people so afraid of flirting? How could you spend your time on something better? If his mother had taken it up sooner they might not have had to spend all those years in hick towns.

He let his mind spin out elaborations on what might have taken place in the Blair household this summer. Had his mother taken the initiative and chased after the old man Blair, or had Blair gotten frisky when his invalid wife wasn't looking?

Maybe the situation did not look good to River Terrace standards. But he was getting sick of River Terrace.

By night fall he was beginning to feel a little proud of the fact that he had gotten himself "tainted". What did it matter if old man Carnes was outraged? So far Carnes had not been able to do anything but splutter. Roy's future lay in New York or Hollywood--if things went right--so why worry about Carnes? It might be fun to sow some wild oats if you didn't get caught.

At bed time he swung his hammock from the back end of the garage to the trunk of one of the neighbor's young cotton wood trees. It was a warm night, and before drifting off to sleep he wondered what it would be like to try to have as many affairs as he could.

But should his affairs be with women? That idea made him nervous. He could not get very far along in such a fantasy before the woman he was pursuing would change to a man. By the time he got drousey he was admitting to himself that chasing endlessly after men seemed ridiculous.

Next morning he awakened in an atmosphere of clean, crisp air. He had overslept slightly, and already he could smell

coffee bubbling in the kitchen. The small, well-painted Skirvin house looked so fresh in the early dawn light. It must be a symbol of everything worthwhile.

He slipped into the denser part of the cotton wood trees to get dressed. Quickly he folded up his hammock and rushed in to do his part of fixing breakfast. In such a morning as this last night's thoughts of sex orgies seemed disgusting. He must see to it that his mind didn't wander off into the gutter so often. Instead of sneering at Carnes because he was so stuffy he should be grateful that the man didn't press on until he landed Roy in jail.

By the time breakfast was over he had decided he must forget the thoughts of seducing record numbers of either men or women and stick to the tested paths of virtue.

However, it was hard to keep his mind on such a narrow track of purity. Just before breakfast was ready his mother drew him off to one side and began whispering to him like a conspirator. It was clear that during the summer she had fallen into the habit of "thinking big", and she was intent on inspiring her son to dream likewise.

"Say," she said, "have you been hearing about the oil boom at Grass Prairie? Has your Dad written so much as a word about it? He should have because things are humming over there. Some people are letting on like only two or three wells have been drilled, and those are all south of town. But Luther has been hearing different reports. They've brought in ten producers since April. Three of those have been gushers. Grass Prairie might turn into the biggest oil field in the country.

Drilling is sure to spread north of town where the old man and old lady Grover have their two sections of land--"

To Hattie her ex-father and mother-in-law would always be the "old man and old lady Grover". In her excited whisper she spelled out the prospects. "The old lady Grover will bust a gut before any oil money goes to me. They'll cut me completely out. Well, I don't care. I've got other things to think of. But you children are as much your Dad's as mine. If that bunch at Grass Prairie gets a wad of money they ought to help you kids get an education. The thing to do is find out exactly what the situation is."

"Now, the Morrises are going to be here Friday. I wish Blanche weren't so taken up with them. They certainly paid her little enough for all the work she did in their house. But if she wants to admire them that's her business. It's just possible the old man Morris might know whether your Dad has a chance to get any money out of the oil boom. It won't do for me to ask him questions. I've got to play like I'm out of the picture. But you two kids can pump them. Try to find out which direction the pool's likely to spread.

"Oh, it's a shame your Dad hasn't got any land in his own name. He's worked himself to a frazzle farming your grandparent's place ever since we split up. And they haven't turned a thing over to him. But if they get wealthy there's ways to put pressure on them. Your Dad was always behind times with support money. There's no telling how many back payments he owes.

"That's why I say you ought to go on with dramatics. Pay no attention to Blanche. Don't let her bluff you out of it. Now, you may have to waste a year or two here at this little old

University. Learn everything you can. Maybe before long it'll be so you can go to New York or California and get some good training."

Common sense told Roy his mother was talking in impractical terms. Everyone knew only a lucky few ever got rich in oil booms, and everyone also knew the way of a would-be actor is more hazardous than tight-rope walking. But it was exhilarating to have someone on his side.

All day at work he whistled and hummed tunes. Gates noticed it and asked what was eating on him. When he got home he found his mother had just gotten in from spending another day down town. This time she had not spent all her time window shopping in expensive stores. She had taken in the city art gallery, the historical museum and the grounds of the University. She had taken special pains to get a good look at the auditorium.

"It's gaudy," she told Roy. "A waste of a lot of good money. It's what goes on inside that counts."

Again she had worn the same blue dress she had sported on the bus. As soon as she was home she took it off to pat out some spots with cleaning fluid. Roy peeked through her three suitcases and proved what he had suspected. The chic looking navy blue was the only nice dress she had. The hot weather had also worn Hattie down so that today she looked older. But she kept up a line of lively patter all evening. Even if some of her statements bordered on the far-fetched and grandiose her high spirits were making her visit very pleasant.

Since the Morrises were to arrive the next day Blanche was in a flutter to get the house looking just right. All evening long she kept an ear cocked for the telephone to ring.

"Mrs. Morris will call me I'm sure. In her letter she said they'd arrive in the evening. Surely she'll give me a more definite time than that. I'd better count on skipping work tomorrow afternoon in case they drive up sooner than five o'clock. I do want to be at the door to welcome them when they come."

Supper was served and still the phone had not rung. Hattie scolded Blanche for being so fidgety. "The old man and old lady Morris know how to take care of themselves. If they miss this place they'll find a hotel. You don't have to be here to spoon feed them."

Again she had referred to Mr. Morris as "old man". The phrase surprised Roy. For one thing the Grass Prairie lawyer could not be more than a year or two older than Mrs. Grover herself. And in the past she had always been careful to speak respectfully about him even to the point of suggesting he was something special in her private world. But if that were true in the past he had obviously slipped by now. Hattie had become acquainted with a world even grander than that of the Morrisses.

While talking Hattie picked at her food. She complained that several of the dishes were fattening. "That sweet potatoe alone has more calories than you should risk eating all day if you want to stay slim," she said. The new fangled word, "calorie", gave them a jolt. It was entirely too scientific for household use.

But she was determined to steer the conversation away from the Morrisses. "I heard some gossip today," she said tilting her head back and nibbling at an ear of corn. "From some woman riding home on the bus. Do you have some little nook out



here called 'Pristine'?" she asked. "'Pristine' my eye. I can imagine what it's like without even seeing it. This gossip I heard shows the type of people who live out there. Maybe you've already heard the story. Some bus driver. I didn't get his name. He was supposed to have burnt his house down, left his wife, and run off to join the Navy."

Roy spoke up quickly. "He didn't burn his house down. His wife did that--"

"She didn't either. It was an accident," said Blanche.

"And he didn't join the Navy. He joined the Air Force," said Roy.

"Oh well, if you've already heard the story I won't go on with it," said Hattie.

Blanche had stopped eating her sweet potato. Roy glanced toward her and noticed her face was expressionless, but her hands were clasped tightly in her lap. She had wadded up her white, embossed paper napkin and was squeezing and unsqueezing it between her palms.

Roy realized he had spoken up too quickly when correcting his mother's misinformation. So he tried to look unconcerned and lifted his ice tea glass to his mouth as though he were trying to suck on one of the ice cubes inside. The breath from his nostrils began clouding up the cold glass concealing his face even more.

Blanche said, "Go on. What else did you hear?"

"Something about the same man getting into trouble a year ago. I suppose you've heard that too."

Blanche did not answer. Roy lowered his tea glass and said, "No, we haven't heard that."

"It isn't important," said Mrs. Grover. "Let's talk about the Morrises."

But it wasn't long until Hattie got back to the gossip she had heard. Her story went that a year ago the same bus driver had been out hunting rabbits with a sixteen year old boy. "--He climbed through a barbed wire fence. That's the way the woman on the bus told it to me. His twenty-two rifle went off and shot the boy in the leg. I suppose you've already heard a story something like that. This bus driver sounds like one of those men who can't keep out of mischief. One tight scrape can be bad luck. Two--well, maybe. But three. No. You'd better leave him alone."

Both Roy and Blanche remained silent. Neither had heard about an accidental shooting a year ago. If it had occurred that would account for one accident. The house burning, not directly Thorpe's fault, must be what Hattie meant by two.

"What was the third scrape?" Roy asked after a moment.

"The third is in today's paper," said Hattie. The woman on the bus had a copy and pointed out the item herself. Not headlines. Just a little inch-high squib near the want-ads. They don't want to play up troubles soldiers get into. If you've still got this morning's edition you can read about it a lot better than I can tell it to you. He and some young soldier tried to burglarize a pawn shop in downtown San Antonio. Not accidental stuff this time. But real crime. Both were caught red-handed. The police didn't know whether to hand them over to the civil courts or turn them back to the military. I can't eat this whole ear of corn. Those stewed apricots you've put out for dessert look like they're loaded with sugar. Blanche,

you'll have to get used to the fact that I can't touch sweets. Tomorrow I'll look around and see if I can find a store that specializes in dietetic foods. A town the size of Fort Boomer should have one some where."

Roy could not be sure Blanche searched through the morning paper to find the article her mother said was there. The paper lay in a more or less separated state on the end table by the telephone. There was one period when Hattie followed Roy out in the garden when she could have looked it over. It was dusk, and Hattie spent a long while talking to Roy although she had nothing special to say. She merely noted that this morning was the time scheduled for Mrs. Blair's funeral. "I can't help but feel blue. She had a lot of good qualities although she'd gotten peevish from so much bad health." All of this she could have said in front of Blanche. Only the habit of conspiracy had caused her to follow her son out in the garden for a little talk.

When they got back inside the morning newspaper was neatly folded and placed in the magazine rack built on one end of the telephone table. Roy had his chance to look through it just before bed time. It was then that Hattie lured Blanche into the bed room to get the daughter to set her hair. "Let's close the bed room door," Mrs. Grover said, true to her habit of secretness. "Roy is listening to the radio, and you can't concentrate on my waves." Blanche cautioned Roy to keep an ear for the telephone in case the Morrisises should ring, then she set her mother's hair behind a closed bedroom door. No doubt Hattie whispered some more of her feelings about Mrs. Blair and perhaps other things as well.

Roy carefully noted how the paper had been placed in the rack then took it out. The article told little that Hattie had not. Thorpe's age, a parenthetical note after his name, turned out to be thirty-one. The name of the pawn shop was the "Silver Dollar", and the accomplice proved to be an Air Force inductee of ten days named Billie D. Smith. He was seventeen. Both were being held in the San Antonio city jail.

Next day at work Gates said he had noticed the article too. He even remembered that the shooting accident over a year ago had also made the papers. But even with Roy prodding his memory several times during the day he could not recall the name of the boy who had been shot. "Something common. Something short. No, it wasn't Smith. No, it wasn't Brown. It wasn't Jones either."

Blanche left her teaching job at two pm to hurry home early in case the Morrises should show up in the "afternoon" instead of the "evening". Hattie again spent the morning seeing more of the sights of Fort Boomer, then managed to meet her daughter at her school and ride out to River Terrace with her. Both women had been waiting for the Grass Prairie visitors since ten minutes to three. Roy got home at four forty-five, and still they had not showed up.

Mr. and Mrs. Morris drove up at five minutes to six. The sun was still fairly high and the weather hot. They had an impressive car, an Oldsmobile that looked new enough to have just been driven out of the car dealer's. However, it was a 1941 model. Amongst Mr. Morris's first words was an explanation of why he had bought at the last of August. "Hello, Blanche,

you're lookin' good," he said. "It's just a 1941. Skinned old Buck Rich in his year end sale. He's still kickin' hisself fer makin' a rock bottom offer. Out poker-faced him. He thought dead sure I'd wait three weeks to get the new forty-two's. Turned pale when I pulled out my check book and wrote out his quoted price. It's got a short wave radio. Built in. Built in heater too. High and low heat. Ash trays. Three." He giggled. "None of us smoke. This here deluxe pile upholstery. We've got every pile of it covered up with factory made seat covers. But it's gray to match the outside. Only way to tell inside from out is to sit on it. How are you, Mrs. Grover?"

Besides the features which Mr. Morris described the new Oldsmobile had white sidewall tires, a bug screen over its distinctive grille, a panel clock plainly visible from the outside and a three foot long radio areal which arose from a factory made hole sticking up from the top near the front center just above the slim chromium divider in the windshield. A specially prepared fox tail was attached to its tip.

Blanche rushed out to the car long before Mr. Morris was through with his explanation. She did not know whether to rush to his side of the car to prove she was drinking in every word of his shrewd horse trade or to fly, arrow straight, to the far side where Mrs. Morris was slowly opening the broad new door and squinting into the light of the setting sun to see what they had driven up to. Blanche finally threw up her hands and rushed to Mrs. Morris's side of the car. With tear choked voice she said, "I just don't know which of you to hug first."

Mrs. Morris's slow-paced dignity lasted until she was completely alit from the Oldsmobile. When, finally, she was

completely out and standing firmly on the Bermuda grass she fell into a heart felt hug with her former "girl of the summer". Their embrace was long, and they patted each other on the back and cried. "You big girl. You've gone off and left us," said Mrs. Morris. "You're wonderful. Both of you," said Blanche. "And to think you've come to visit me in my own home."

Mrs. Grover stood coolly on the cupola in her freshly spotted navy blue dress and watched all this. Her unflustered pose seemed to annoy Mr. Morris. Once, after his brief, "How are you," he gave her a quick second glance then lowered his eyes and fumbled with the key in the new fangled ignition.

Roy didn't know what to do with himself. He knew he was supposed to act glad to see these old friends of the family, but the truth was he scarcely remembered them, and the few recollections he had were not really pleasant. What should he do?

He took a stance half way between the cupola and the car and smiled. "Howdy, Mr. Morris. Glad to see you, Mrs. Morris." Neither of the visitors noticed these comments, so he added, "Do you remember me?"

All of his contributions to cordiality went unnoticed. Mr. Morris was fumbling with his ignition, and his wife was still clasping her former chore girl.

By the time Mr. Morris got the key loose and eased himself out of the driver's seat he seemed to be fed up with the formalities of greetings. The short man stomped his feet on the grass as if trying to restore circulation. Then he lifted his thick arms to the back of his head and pushed his five gallon head down over his forehead. "Ahhh," he said as he stretched. Then he took off his hat and flipped it into the



back seat of his car. His head was still thickly and handsomely covered with light brown hair. There was scarcely a trace of encroaching baldness.

In fact he was amazingly well-preserved. Perhaps he was slightly heavier than Roy had remembered him, but any pounds he had put on were well distributed. No bulge overlapped the belt line. No sags marred the nice drape to the seat of his pants. There was no droop to the broad shoulders.

It was true he was wearing a vest, a garment that was slightly out of style, and its silken back was completely wet from unevaporated sweat, but otherwise his clothes seemed to show him off just right. You sensed that here was a man who would always look good, would always attract attention no matter where he was. And he knew it. As he stretched and stomped he seemed to be showing himself off, a sleek, solid bull-dog that you would like to pat on the head but didn't dare approach.

When he had limbered up from his long drive he walked around to the front of his car and began picking at the bugs which had lodged on the screen. Off came a splattered grasshopper, a second grass-hopper, the remains of a hornet. With a swipe of his pudgy fingers he dislodged a peppering of gnats. Then he brushed his palms together fastidiously and flicked his mits in the air until both they and his screen would pass as clean. You got the impression that he could be neat if he wanted to, or he could make fun of cleanliness if that suited him better. With his back toward Roy and Mrs. Grover he looked far out over the horizon and waited until Planche and his wife were through embracing. If Mrs. Grover was going to give him a cold shoulder he could do her one better. People must notice

him. If they did not he must take steps to make them regret it.

Blanche now tore herself away from Mrs. Morris and with open mouth rushed around the car to cup both of the man's strong hands in her palms. "You look so healthy. Not a day older. How is the law practice? You're not hitting it sixteen hours a day like you used to, are you? You must be a real pillar of the community by now. So many people have so many reasons to be grateful to you."

The lawyer took his hands away and pushed his hat far back on his head. Still scanning all 360 degrees of the horizon he said, "Some sub-divider made a killin' off this real estate, didn't he? Flood mud. The whole business will be a foot under water one of these days."

Blanche did not pick up his line of comment, but went on asking about his personal welfare. "You must be hungry. We've kept a little snack warm for you. But you haven't noticed Mama and Roy. Isn't Mama looking great? Hasn't Roy grown? Did you recognized him? I'll bet Monte has grown too. Cute little Monte. Has he shot up as tall as Roy?"

"Taller," said Mrs. Morris. Then she nodded formally to Mrs. Grover who politely nodded back.

"Yep, Monte's bigger," said Mr. Morris who had broken off from kicking the river mud long enough to scrutinize Roy. You could tell he was not impressed by the boy's size. He saw no need to answer any of Blanche's other questions. After all, he had now become the center of attention by saying no more than a word or two. The best way to keep the women buzzing around him



was to keep his mouth shut.

"But where is Monte?" asked Blanche although she knew perfectly well their letters had mentioned nothing about the son's accompanying the parents on their trip. "Do come in and make yourselves at home. We've fixed it up so you can kick your shoes off and relax. Oh yes, Monte. Why didn't you bring your boy with you? We have plenty of room. You didn't leave him at home because you thought we would be crowded, did you?"

Mrs. Morris, seeing none of her husband's reasons to inspect the soil was advancing toward the cupola. If the soil didn't interest her the house did. As she led the party indoors her bright eyes analyzed every household detail. Seating herself on the davenport she said, "Monte's joined the Marines."

"The Marines." Blanche sucked in her breath. "Monte grown up and already in the Marines. Well, well, well."

No more than a foot away from the davenport, so close Mrs. Morris had been forced to alter her dignified stance to squeeze passed it, was the breakfast table. Blanche and Mrs. Grover had moved it in from the kitchen. Then they had elongated it by inserting two spare leaves and had loaded it with a great feast. Unfortunately, while the guests had entered through the screen door two flies had come in with them and were buzzing over the marshmallows decorating the top of the candied sweet potatoes. Blanche gasped and began shooing them away.

"Yes, the Marines. Is this the snack?" asked Mrs. Morris. "You shouldn't have done this. Father and I ate a nice meal in the little coffee shop down on the highway before we hunted your place up. I couldn't touch a thing else, and father never stuffs himself in hot weather."

Blanche looked dismayed. "You've already eaten?"

It would be difficult to imagine how the entrance of long awaited guests could go further wrong. The hour was six o'clock. The sun was lowering in the west to what would probably be a beautiful sun set about the time the evening meal would be finished. A table was laden with freshly cooked dishes, the warm ones getting cool and the ice cubes getting hot. The three people who had prepared it were hungrily standing by ready to eat. Then the guests say they have already stopped four blocks away to eat a blue plate special.

Mrs. Morris seemed to realize she had carried her reserve a little too far. She frowned and looked toward her husband who had just settled beside her on the devanport, sailed his hat to rest on the telephone table, folded his hands behind his head and leaned back to rest. She could read nothing from the blank expression on his face. In a moment she placed one hand to her chin and said, "Most of these dishes will still be good tomorrow, won't they?"

Blanche was too rattled to answer immediately. But Roy heard his mother breasting heavily. At first he thought she was angry, but in a moment he heard her sniggering softly.

Blanche gave one more gasp then came out of her perplexed state. "We had planned to cook more things tomorrow," she said. "I tell you what we'll do. We'll talk awhile. We have a lot of old times to hash over. Then around eight o'clock you'll be hungry again. We can eat then. By the time we get through washing the dishes it'll be just right for all of us to bed down for the night."

Mrs. Morris took her hand down from her chin and clutched

it into a little ball. "But Father and I can't stay with you tonight. . We've already made arrangements to call on the Farley's. By eight o'clock we'll have to be at their home all the way on the other side of Fort Boomer."

Mrs. Morris had dropped an important name. Mitchel Farley was a state senator who was being boosted for governor in next year's race. But the weight of the noted name did not cause Planche to conceal her hurt feelings. She burst into tears. "Not stay with us? Not eat with us? Oh, Mrs. Morris, we had planned on your visit for such a long time. Not just Mama and Roy, but Cliff and I. Cliff and I planned it to be a real special visit. We had talked about it so often before he was inducted. If he were here now instead of in Colorado he would be so badly hurt he wouldn't know what to do--"

Mr. Morris spoke. "We'll stay here," he said. "Phone the Farley's and say we got stuck in the river bottom. It don't make any difference to me where I put up for the night. I'll take a slice of that ham and some of those sweet potatoes. Scrape about half the marshmallows off the top and give them to me. We never get them so fancy at our house."

Mrs. Morris showed her good breeding. Instead of looking surprised at her husband and at what must have been a direct change of their carefully laid plans she calmly said, "And I'll taste a bite of your nice cottage cheese salad. Try not to include too much pineapple. With the hot weather it might give me indigestion. You three look like you've had a hard day's work. Hattie you're downright thin. Go right ahead and eat. Father and I will just nibble along here at the end of the table and talk. Now then. About Monte. Yes, we've got a big boy

in our family. And I'm afraid he's already got a mind of his own--"

Her words were spoken matter-of-factly. She might have been telling something as common place as spending good money on yard goods that shrank after the first washing. It was clear she belonged to a school that did not get emotional over the problems of raising children. In fact all emotion would be traps that less disciplined people fell into. Clearly she kept her life under control by thinking ahead and following a plan regardless of momentary pressures which might spring up along the way. She must have been using such an approach in her treatment of Mrs. Grover. Other than the remark about her looking thin she hardly noticed the mother of Blanche, and certainly she showed no signs that the navy blue crepe was any more stylish than her pink print. If anything she managed to melt into the curves of the davenport with a naturalness that tended to make Mrs. Grover look overly formal.

As she picked at her salad, and as her husband wolfed down the man-sized portion of potatoes she told about their son's joining the Marines.

"It will be good discipline for him." Thus she started her story. "That is something he has to learn, and I know of no place better to learn it than the Marines. He will have no choice. He will have to toe the line--"

"But when did he make up his mind?" asked Blanche.

"--I don't know how many times I have told Monte he must discipline himself. For years I thought I was wasting my breath. It's something of a relief to know my problem has been passed

on to very capable hands--"

"You mean you were the one who talked him into it?" asked Blanche. She was sure she had found a case when a woman had successfully performed a job that was supposed to be left to fathers. "Did you hear that, Mama? It was Mrs. Morris who got him to do it." Then she thought for a moment and said, "Maybe Mr. Morris had better tell us what he thinks of it all."

Her invitation to get Monte's father into the story went unnoticed. The father only swallowed the last of his marshmallows and asked, "Got any ice-cream? I'm hot."

"Roy," whispered Blanche. "Hurry out to the garage and unpack your freezer. Roy had turned a whole half gallon of ice-cream for us, Mr. Morris. We've kept it wrapped up in crushed ice and tow sacks in the garage. Be careful, Roy. Don't let any more flies in when you go out."

Mrs. Morris had just swished one away from her nose, no doubt another of those which had made its way inside along with the guests. Because Blanche had carefully Fly-Toxed the whole house when she came home. Traces of its oily smell still mingled with the more pleasant odors of the dinner table.

Roy was careful when he eased out the back door. But when he returned with the cold freezer Mr. Morris was still holding up the story of his son's entry into the Marines by demanding something be done about the excessive heat in the living room.

"Not a breath of air in the whole state of Texas," he was saying as he fanned his vest over his chest.

"It's the low, swampy altitude," said Mrs. Morris. Then

she got to the root of the problem. "Blanche, it's your screen doors that's preventing what little air current you've got here from circulating. Could you get Roy to prop them open with something? Father got an awful case of heat rash the last time he came down to this part of the world."

Just how Blanche should solve the fly problem once the screens were opened she did not say. Mr. Morris was almost certain to be as annoyed at insects as he was with heat. Mrs. Grover sniggered again. However Blanche, looking a little worried, went ahead and ordered Roy to prop open the screen doors, and Hattie put a large helping of ice-cream in a green glass bowl that had come out of a package of oatmeal and served it to the perspiring lawyer. His wife volunteered the information that she could not eat a bite of anything else and went on with her story.

"It happened Monday morning," she said. "Or rather it started happening last Wednesday a week ago when Father brought home the new Oldsmobile. Monte took one look at it and wanted to drive it the first thing. Of course we couldn't let him do it. You know boys. They want to race a car as fast as they can floor board one, and the Olds wasn't broken in at all. It shows how kids that age need discipline. Monte went into a pout, stormed out of the house, and didn't come home until eleven o'clock at night. All of us were in bed. Father had locked the front and back doors and latched all the windows--"

Roy could not control his surprise. In spite of Mr. Morris's moaning about Fort Boomer's heat he knew Grass Prairie's summers were about the same as River Terrace's. "Locked all the windows? How did you sleep?"

"Shh," said Blanche.

Mrs. Morris went on. "Monte couldn't get in. So he broke one of the basement windows. Crashing glass woke up the whole block. Father couldn't put up with it. They had a terrible row down in the basement."

Hattie sniggered again. Mrs. Morris swatted at a fly and said, "Do some of your neighbors keep cows, Blanche? When Father was serving as city councilman last year he got them to restrict fowls and livestock from inside the city limits. We haven't had a fly problem all summer this year. Father wouldn't let him drive the new car for a week. And it would be longer than that if he didn't get over his pout. Well, the next day that boy went out and bought an old beat-up jalopie from one of his highschool cronies--"

Again Roy was surprised. A boy the same age as he having enough money of his own to go out and buy a car? "Gosh," he said.

The lawyer's wife ignored his amazement. "Friday, Saturday and Sunday we found that old flivver sitting every where. We were stumbling over it when we came. We were stumbling over it when we left. Every time we would drive the Oldsmobile in the garage and go into the house to relax that old wreck would come exploding around the corner, and Monte would always leave it so it blocked the driveway. Sunday, right after church, Father and Monte had another row. Father ended up calling the police and having the flivver towed off to the garage--"

"Garage?" asked Roy. "What garage?"

"Oh, we've had an impounding system in Grass Prairie for over a year now." She did not need to explain that her husband

had gotten that through too. She continued. "Monte didn't come home all night. Monday at noon we were sitting around the dinner table when the telephone rang. It was our boy calling from Oklahoma City. He had hitch-hiked there Sunday evening and joined the Marines the first thing Monday morning." For the first time a note of tenderness came into her voice. She was probably holding back tears as she continued.

"As yet we don't know where they've sent him. Maybe they've sent him to San Diego, maybe some where on the East Coast. He's glorying in the surprise now, and we probably won't hear from him for a week or two. When the chief of police heard about his joining up he laughed and let us take his old flivver home free of charge. I know of nothing to do but put an ad in the paper and try to sell it. Monte's title to it is no good. He bought it while a minor. So Father can fix up the title transfer without writing for his signature. Well, it will all straighten out, I'm sure. Monte will be surprised when he learns his old room has been turned over to a little sister."

The lawyer's wife paused in her speech as though she were waiting for something. She did not have long to wait. In a split second's time the three members of the Grover family gasped.

"A little sister?" said Mrs. Grover. "What do you mean?" Although Mrs. Morris was well into middle age Hattie looked her over for signs of pregnancy.

Blanche, however, guessed the answer without having to ask a single question. "You're going to adopt a little girl."

"Yes," said Mrs. Morris.

"Oh," said Hattie, and Roy began stirring at the ice cubes



in his tea glass. Perhaps he had become blase during the summer, but not about parenthood, and the conversation was now dipping into heart felt areas that he sensed were over his head.

"Give me some ice-tea," said Mr. Morris.

"Of course," said Blanche. "Roy, the pot is on the cabinet, and the cubes are in the refrigerator. Be a good boy and get Mr. Morris some tea." She gave these directions in a hurried, half whisper because she was eager to get on with this exciting development. "I just knew you were going to adopt a child. And I knew it would probably be a little girl. Mama, don't you remember what I said when I came home after the first summer I worked for them. Remember I told you that they wanted a big family, and that they would never want to grow old without having one. And remember I told you Mr. Morris always wanted a little girl--"

"I like to drink from one of those goblets," Mr. Morris called into the kitchen where Roy was getting the tea.

"That's more or less the way it's always been," said Mrs. Morris. "I think we got it firmed up this afternoon."

"This afternoon?" asked Mrs. Grover.

"You mean you didn't just drive in to Fort Boomer a few minutes ago?" asked Blanche. "You've been somewhere in the city this afternoon?"

"We spent two hours down at your state orphanage before we hunted up your place," said Mrs. Morris quite frankly. "The little girl was our main reason for coming down here. Father doesn't have time to break away from his law practice unless the reason is very important. And he's got so many irons in the fire besides his court room work. Last year he volunteered

to fill out a vacancy in the city council, and this year he's serving on the county draft board. But we have been planning to take this step sometime. We aren't getting any younger, and the house seemed so vacant with Monte gone that we broke away this week and did it. You can't imagine how much politics is wrapped up in adopting babies. For years we've been building up the right contacts. Last month the Farley's wrote us that something might break loose here at your local orphanage--"

Mrs. Morris's voice was now taking on tones of authority as though she were in a field that she knew and liked. "Politics," she repeated. "It's a nasty business every where, but I think it's really gotten out of hand here in your state. So clannish. They won't give an outsider a fair chance. Some prissy little man quizzed Father for two solid hours this afternoon. He tried so hard to trip father up, but he didn't get any where. 'How do you feel about authority?' he asked, and Father told him he thought Mitchell Farley was about the best authority he knew of--"

Roy was now coming back with a goblet of tea that was sweating from the ice he had dropped in it. The living room was so crowded he didn't know which would be the best way to get passed the extended table and around to Mr. Morris. Should he squeeze to the left passed his mother or to the right passed his sister? He chose the right which meant he must reach across Mrs. Morris to get the tea to her husband.

As he was bending over this special lady his hand slipped and he sloshed a half a glass of tea and an ice cube into her lap.

Mrs. Morris stopped speaking and emitted a squeal between

her teeth. Her hand swatted at the wet area on her pink skirt as though it were a swarm of ants that must be smothered before they spread over the whole room. Mr. Morris bolted a good foot forward from his reclining position and glared at Roy. Both Blanche and Hattie screamed.

Roy apologized profusely. It was the worst possible blunder. His sister raced for a towel and his mother for paper napkins. Within seconds they had enough yardage on hand to blot up a major plumbing leak. The lawyer's wife managed to stand up right between the davenport and table and inspect the damage. When she did so the spilled ice cube skittered under the table. Roy quickly crawled down on all-fours and picked it up before it could melt into a dangerous puddle.

After a few moments the lady decided the wreckage was not extensive. Still, she hissed between her teeth, "If I have to send this dress to the cleaners, young man, you'll have to pay for it."

A moment of silence followed. Then Mrs. Morris shook her bobbed hair as though flicking off the whole episode and resumed her story.

"The prissy little fool made his gibe about authority. He was sure it would provoke Father into getting mad, so he kept boring in. 'You resent authority, don't you?' he said. Father answered, 'Did you vote for Mr. Farley?' Well, it was the prissy one's turn to get mad. 'We're not allowed to discuss politics,' he snorted. Father was the one who kept boring in, and he said, 'How did you get your job, then?' The little upstart ignored that question and asked, 'Are you depraved?' Can you

imagine a question sillier than that? Asking a person to his face if he is depraved. He had separated us so I was sitting out in the waiting room, but Father had left the door open a crack so I could follow the whole thing. I almost laughed when I heard him asking my husband if he was depraved. 'No, and Mr. Farley isn't either,' was what Father answered back."

The conversation went smoothly from there on out. Even at the end of the meal when all had eaten and all had piece-mealed, there was no awkward moment when they should decided what to do with the dirty dishes. Blanche, anticipating every detail, had promised Roy a dollar tip if he would cooperate.

"Mr. Morris," she said at the moment all were folding their napkins, "Do you remember that pistol, I believe it had pearl handles, that you bought the second summer I worked for you? Your wife was so frightened of it she made you pack it away in the garage loft for a week. Did you ever learn to shoot it?"

Yes, not only did he remember it and learn to shoot it, but by now he had a collection of three pistols. His wife had even gotten over her fears enough to pull the trigger of one of them a time or two herself.

"Then you must be a good shot," said Blanche. "A friend of ours does target practice in his back yard. He's Mr. Carnes, and he and Cliff were good friends through college. They live only a few blocks away. There's time before the sun goes down to run over and see which of you is the better shot."

Both guests agreed to her suggestion immediately. She could not have thought of anything that would have pleased them better. Hattie said she would be happy to go along for a little outing, and Roy volunteered to do the dishes. He made

it sound as though he had not already been paid to do it. And so the cleaning up problem was solved. It wouldn't have done to have asked either of the Morrises to help wash their former serving girl's dishes, and it would have been almost as bad to have had them sit tediously in the living room while the immediate family pitched in and did it.

When they got back all were in high spirits because Mr. Morris had beaten Art Carnes in two shots out of three. Hattie had also gotten over her cautious stage and was now conversing freely with the lawyer's wife. "I'd like a game of forty-two," she said. "Do you remember how everybody in Grass Prairie used to drag out their set of dominoes and play a game of forty-two?"

"We still do," said Mrs. Morris. "I'd love to have a game tonight."

Only four could play at that particular domino game which left Roy to entertain himself for most of the evening. Probably because he had been left out of so much of the activity he was not in such high spirits as the others. Very quickly Mr. Morris's bragging when he won grated on his nerves. So early in the evening he pitched his hammock between the cottonwoods and called it a night. He drifted off to sleep hearing the happy sounds of a forty-two party coming from the living room. Blanche was, indeed, proving to be a charming hostess.

The next morning he overslept. Perhaps his subconscious mind told him it was Saturday and he could luxurate in his hammock longer than usual, or perhaps his subconscious was also telling him the entertainment which would be going on today was not for him, and it was just as well that he sleep through it. His mother had to call him to wake him up. The sun was already

shining brightly in his eyes. By the time he got in the kitchen the four adults had finished breakfast, had pushed back their dirty plates and were talking over old times. Hattie had blossomed into an especially chatty conversationalist. It seemed her skillfully worded questions were turning the table talk toward the Grass Prairie oil boom.

"Just how do you know when they are going to open up an area?" she asked Mrs. Morris.

The lawyer's wife addressed the kitchen air as though she might be in front of a graduate class for advanced studies. "Signs. A lot of little signs all put together. Check them out one against the other. Whatever you do don't get off on a false scent."

Blanche set some cold bacon and eggs in front of her brother and looked at Roy questioningly. Roy had awakened in a grumpy mood. At first he didn't understand his sister's special glances. He frowned and looked around the table. His mother was also giving him some special glances. He gnawed on his eggs and tried to figure out what was going on. He finally realized Blanche was asking if he would again do the dishes, and his mother was trying to get him to help her pump the Morris about the oil boom.

He thought things over. The dollar tip had been for last night. Nothing had been said about playing maid all day Saturday. As for his mother, she seemed to be accomplishing her purpose by herself. He looked out the window at the bright sunny day.

"Have any of those signs turned up around our old place?" Hattie asked.

"No. It's all south of town," Mrs. Morris said.

"First, leasers came through the South Lake area, just a section here and there grabbed up. Then some seismograph crews came in. A couple of test wells. No deeper than the ones you put down for a stock tank. But they set dynamite off in them. That was when Father bought our first quarter of pasture land two miles from South Lake. I told him the timing wasn't right. A year later they were putting down a wildcat well. Dry hole. Everything died down. I told Father, 'Buy'. He bought three more quarters, left us owning a section of land all told. Well, a year ago this August ninety-eight percent of the land south of town was leased, and two gushers were blowing their rigs fifteen miles from the town square. The closest hole is still eight miles from our land. But we're not about to give anyone a lease--"

"Fifteen miles from the square!" marveled Hattie. But there were wrinkles between her eyes, almost a frown. "What's going on in the other direction--up north--around Antelope Wells?"

"Far too north," said Mrs. Morris. "No speculation leasing at all. The same east of town. Argylle is twenty miles too far away. You'd better get used to the facts. The field lies south of Grass Prairie. Oh, there are a few slick advance men smelling around as far north as Ted's community. Ted's relatives are getting excited. But nothing's broken loose yet. No signs--"

Blanche broke in to discuss the plans for the day. "What about your appointment at the orphanage, Mrs. Morris? Would you have time to run over to River Terrace's pride and joy? It's called Rodeo Ranch. Less than half a mile from here. The local Baptist church saved a whole five acres of virgin.

land so kids can practice roping calves. Saturday mornings the boys really turn out. It's fun to stand at the fence and cheer the winners. Sometimes the calves are the winners."

This suggestion surprised Roy because he knew both Blanche and his mother considered all forms of rodeo too trashy to fool with. However, the prestigious Morrisises seemed to be interested in the idea. "We might take a quick run to some place like that," said Mrs. Morris. "But remember we've made another appointment with the Farley's for eleven this morning. All evening is taken up at the orphanage."

"Give me that last egg in the platter," said Mr. Morris. "Your li'l brother's not going to eat but two."

Hattie quickly steered the conversation back to the oil wells. "What's it like with a boom going on? Hasn't Grass Prairie changed? There must be a lot of dangerous people on the streets."

Blanche interrupted once more. "Excuse me, but I was wondering if Roy would take care of the dishes again. How about it, Roy? I'll make it up to you when the rush is over."

"Some of the old timers keep moaning about the class of people that have flooded the town," said Mrs. Morris. "But Father and I have no patience with them. Actually, the new people are a hard working bunch that has brought prosperity to town. Drillers, truckers, rough-necks, they all have to get up early in the morning and drive sixteen to twenty miles just to get to their jobs. They probably slept in a rented room with five other cots in it. More than likely they paid first class hotel prices for a dirty mattress on sagging springs. Yes, there's been a few bad things. Father just finished with



a terrible case. A twenty year old candy salesman murdered a fifty year old woman who turned out to be nothing but a whore. We hated to lose the case, but there wasn't a thing Mr. Morris could do for him. He's to be executed in October unless an appeal gets through. Father has taken all the necessary steps, but there's just no chance for him. He stuffed her body in a gasoline truck and set fire to it. It was awful--"

And so Roy was left to do the dishes again. He barely had time to finish them before the party was back. Mr. Morris had cut the outing short to make sure he got down to the Farley's in time.

As soon as the visitors left for their eleven o'clock appointment Hattie changed into a more comfortable dress and lured Roy out of earshot of Blanche and said, "What do you make of it? Do you think the old lady Morris was telling the truth about the oil field? Do you really think there's nothing doing around our old home, or do you think she's trying to cover things up? You should have put in a question or two because that woman would throw a wall-eyed fit before she would help me out. There's one thing we can watch for. We can find out where the Morrises buy their next land, and if they pay money for anything north of town our chances are better than she's letting on for. Roy, I'm convinced you ought to stick with acting. I think you've got it in you to make good. That would be something, wouldn't it, to show that bunch of bums around Grass Prairie that one of our family got away from them and made something out of himself. Stay with it. Don't let anyone talk you into lowering your sights. We'll find a way to pay for your education. Get the best training you can, and

don't loose sight of your goal."

At the noon meal the members of the Grover family had to eat last night's left-overs by themselves. The Morrisises, of course, were attending their various appointments. There wasn't as much left of it as they thought. The piece-mealing had been more extensive than they had realized.

Blanche was cautious about planning future entertainment. Hattie didn't have to tell her to wait and see before she went off half cocked. Blanche was already trying to guess what the lawyer and his wife might do. "I'm predicting they will show up around five o'clock," she said. "It must take hours and hours of red-tape before you can completely adopt a child. Who knows whether they are planning to go so far as to take the child home with them on this trip. Let's plan on fixing supper for them. But something tells me they'll find another place to sleep tonight."

During the visit the guests had dropped no details about the length of their stay. After all, they had clearly insisted that no frills be made, and if the hostess chose not to follow their instructions she must take what comes.

Blanche was not bitter about so fluid a situation as this. Nor did she seem disappointed about the part of the visit that had already taken place. On the contrary, everything had gone off swell. Beyond a doubt she had proved she was a capable adult in full right and was now able to talk with her former employers on equal terms. In fact there were slightly triumphant glints in both Hattie's and Blanche's eyes. Perhaps in a few areas they had proved themselves a little more than "equal". For example, both the Mister and the "Missus" had let their

hair down a little further than they had planned, an indefinable but perceptible victory for the underdog Grovers.

None of the three were very surprised to find that Blanche's predictions were not quite correct. The Morrises drove up, not at five, but at a quarter after two. The sun was blazing hot overhead when they heard the musical sound of the new Oldsmobile's horn in the driveway. All three gasped and rushed to the front door.

A cute little girl about three years old was standing self-consciously on the front seat between the two Grass-Prairie-ites. Mr. Morris was guiding the car with his left hand and was using his right arm to encircle the child and hold her up in a standing position so the Grovers would notice her the first thing. Long, blonde, cork-screw curls, soft as eider down lining hung in perfect symmetry on either side of her angelic face. An over-size blue ribbon balanced her off center part. Her big eyes took in everything, but her little thumb was in her mouth, and she was chewing on it.

As soon as the Oldsmobile was completely stopped Mr. Morris scooped up the little girl in both arms and carried her to the three Grovers who were "ooing and Ahing" on the cupola.

"This here is Albertina," said Mr. Morris. "Get your thumb out of your mouth, Honey. Ain't she sweet? Say, howdy, Honey child. Puddin'. Puddin' and pie. Won't you say howdy for us? Come on, Puddin'. Give a big smile. We're gonna have to teach her to get her thumb out of her mouth," he said to his wife.

The exclamations over Albertina's sweetness took several minutes to subside. As soon as it was possible to say any-

thing else, Planche asked them to bring the little darling inside and she would pour her a big glass of iced tea.

"How did you manage to get her so fast? How did you manage to get her at all? She's the sweetest thing. Roy, you'll have to crank up some more ice cream. I'll bet Albertina would love a dish of nice cold peach ice cream for supper," said Planche.

This time Mrs. Morris spoke up with more vigor than she had the day before. "No. It's out of the question. We can't possibly stay for another meal. I packed our luggage this morning. We'll have to pick it up and be off in a few minutes." Today's firmness was making up for yesterday's weakness. Accepting Planche's invitation to spend the night in the Skirvin cottage had caused her to drop her pose of un-crackable might for a few hours. Today she had seen her error, and there was no chance that she would fall for any more distracting forty-two parties, rodeos and over eating. Her refusal to stay any longer rang off a metal that could not be penetrated.

But Blanche tried. "Off in a few minutes? But it's after two o'clock. Almost mid-afternoon. You're not going to try to drive all the way to Gloriona before it's time to put this sweet little girl to bed? Even in that new Oldsmobile it would be mid-night before you could tuck in this little bundle of sweetness."

"We have thought of that," said Mrs. Morris motioning to some bulky packages on the back seat of the car. "We stopped by Bernstein's and bought a traveling crib that can be strapped on to the back seat of any car. It's a complete set, bed clothes, pillow and all. Well, Father, let's rush. It's been nice see-

ing you again Mrs. Grover, Roy. It's been a busy day for us. Blanche, you've got a nice little home here. It's a start in the right direction. What a shame poor Cliff had to leave a set-up that shows so much promise, but I'm sure his experience in the army will be good training for the battle of life which lies ahead. As for our part, we are thankful to the almighty powers that this bit of happiness has been delivered into our care."

The majestic tones in her voice were fitting for the gravity of the step they had just taken. Both Hattie and Blanche hastened to tell her what a wonderful thing they were doing.

"He'll be such a comfort in your old age," said Hattie.

"We aren't quite to the point where we will have to think of old age," said Mrs. Morris.

Hattie quickly backed away from this conversational opening which seemed to have mis-fired. "But surely you're not leaving before you tell us how you managed to get the child so quickly," she said. "Yesterday you seemed to be bogged down with an old fuddy-duddy of some sort."

These words led toward a friendlier avenue than the ones about approaching old age. "That little snivel was no problem at all," said Mrs. Morris. Her voice lost its slow, grand pace. Her face brightened. She could not resist taking a few moments to tell how she had handled the prissy little man who had tried to give Father a rough time yesterday.

"I demanded to see Albertina right off," she said. "I told him the Farley's were waiting for us out in the parking lot. We did not have any time to waste. At first he ignored me and settled back in his chair to ask if I drank or smoked. I cut that

short and reminded him he had already checked our references. The Farleys had told me he had. I could see he was not going to be as hard with me as he had been with Father yesterday, so I began talking about a wandering jew he had hanging in the window. I told him how he could force some little blue blossoms on it if he would cover it with gauze.

"Soon he began twiddling his thumbs and wanted to know how we felt about taking an illegitimate child in our own home. I cried a little bit, and told him Father and I had already talked it over with our minister. We had asked the lord to deliver us from prejudice. He twiddled his thumbs some more and glanced at a wrist watch he was wearing. He said the children had just been fed and they usually bedded them down for a nap at this time of day. I offered to tip-toe in where they were napping if it would mean I could get a peak at her. He fidgeted and called in a nurse who led us out to a sort of patio.

"A bunch of children were playing in a sand pile. I could see they weren't going to be bedded down for a nap at all. The dead give away was what they had done to Albertina. The other children were in little cotton jumpers, but our Albertina was spruced up at her best. Some nurse must have spent an hour fixing her hair alone. A room mother was holding her off to one side so she wouldn't get sand on her newly washed clothes. Anyone could see they wanted us to have her. Oh, it was all I could do to keep from running over and scooping her up in my arms. But I frowned and said, Father ought to be called in to see her too--"

By this time Mr. Morris had gotten their two pieces of

luggage out of the bed room and had placed them in the car's big trunk. Again he had stood Albertina on the front seat as though showing off his proudest possession. The little girl seemed to realize this was a time to look her best, and she carefully stayed put. Soon she began to fidget, and her thumb went back to her mouth.

Mr. Morris seemed annoyed that his wife was taking time to talk some more. He pushed his hat back and looked at the hot, brassy sky overhead. "Hot. Muggy too," he said. "No air stirring. I never did like a big city."

Roy and he were the only men folks around, so the Grover boy sidled up to him as a friendly gesture to the visitor from his home town. Point blank Mr. Morris asked him a question, "Is your mama going to teach school this fall?"

Roy said, "Of course. She always teaches school."

Bluntly, Mr. Morris asked. "How much is she making?"

Roy knew this was a personal question that should not be asked. But it was thrown at him so suddenly he didn't know how to refuse. "Uh, I don't know." But the lawyer had turned on a gaze that bored straight into the boy's pupils. "Uh--I think it's a hundred dollars a month. Yes, it's a hundred a month," he said.

"Just a hundred," said the lawyer. "That ain't enough to live comfortable on. How much is it going to cost you to go to school?"

Roy squirmed. "I'm working this summer. I've saved some. That'll help out."

"Shit," said Mr. Morris. "You didn't make enough this

summer to pay for your soda pop. You're going to run through seven or eight hundred dollars this winter if you go to a fancy school like the one down town. And who's going to foot the bill? You're planning on draining your Dad dry, that's what. Ain't that what you and Mattie have got up your sleeves?"

This was insulting talk, the kind of language that should result in someone getting a bloody nose. But who was going to stand up to a stocky power house like Morris? Roy turned red with anger, but there was nothing he could do but bite his lip and back away.

Mrs. Morris soon wound up her account of the adoption. She said her goodbyes, got in the car, squeezed Albertina, and they were off.

The Grovers went back in the house and closed the screen door.

"Roy, get out the Fly-tox," said Blanche. "There's enough flies in here to eat us up."

"Whew!" said Mattie sinking on the davenport. "Not just yet, Blanche. That stuff is so smelly. I want to sit here and think a minute. Maybe take a little nap."

"Your right," said Blanche as she settled in the easy chair and kicked off her shoes. "Well; that's that." She blew a wisp of hair away from her eyes. "Now then. We've got ten days before Mama's school starts. By that time I've got to have this house rented, everything moved out and on the way to Colorado. Roy, you'd better start looking for a place to live if you're going to take that fool dramatics course this fall. We've a lot of things to do here at the end of the summer."



Part III  
The Room with the Curb Window

Moving away from River Terrace meant running into a few problems in timing. Blanche had it planned to turn the house over to renters one day before Hattie's school should begin in Gloriona. According to that schedule the daughter should leave for Colorado and the mother for Oklahoma on the same day. Since it would be two weeks before Roy could enroll in the University Blanche arranged for him to stay with the family next door and keep right on at his job up to his last free day. During this fortnight he would have time to scout out the college area and find the best room possible for the least money. He should move into it the day before he was to enroll.

All went well until two days before Hattie and Blanche were to leave. Then some of the carefully laid plans blew up all at once. Blanche was taking two hours off from her next-to-last day at teaching to do some particular packing when her prospective renters called to say they were sorry, but could they beg loose from their agreement to move in? They had found a house five dollars per month cheaper that had two bedrooms. Surely Mrs. Skirvin wouldn't expect them to force their fourteen year old daughter to sleep a whole winter on a back porch when they could find better arrangements.

Blanche obligingly let them out of their agreement, hung up the phone and turned to Hattie. "Stars above," she said, "what shall I do?"

Before the mother could think up a suitable course to take in such an emergency a Western Union boy rode up on a bicycle. He had an important telegram for Mrs. Skirvin.

It was from a Major Donati, a name she had never heard before. For a return address he had given, not a city, not a state, not even the name of the army base where Cliff was stationed, but some strange fort that "Blanche had never heard of before. The telegram stated Cliff was to be operated on for obstruction of the colon at nine-thirty. It was now four minutes to ten.

Blanche did not panic. "Don't say anything to me, Mama," she said. "Let me think. Stay still, and let me have a few second's peace. Then I'll know what will be the best course to take.

After a few moments she decided it was best to call the Red Cross. At least they could tell her where her husband was. When she finally contacted a responsible person at that institution she found herself talking to a man who was impatient with her. "Why have you been trying to fight all these battles by yourself?" he said. "Don't you know the military always takes care of officer's dependents? If you had contacted the right group at the local air base you could have had your house rented, your things packed for you and all arrangements made for moving up to your new home." In no time at all he had made her a plane reservation so she could be in Denver the next morning where her husband's surgery had taken place. Ten minutes after he hung up the phone rang. A pleasant voice wanted confirmation that she had a house for rent. Within an hour an olive drab colored car from the Air Base drove up in front of the house.

As quickly as all that "Blanche was getting her house rented. But Roy was also getting a surprise. The personable

officer driving the car was none other than Captain Charles Sykes, the blonde moustache he had so rashly tried to seduce and had ended up hating. Beside the Captain, both fitted cozily in the front seat, were a youngish major and his wife. The major was small for a service man, and his wife looked about five years older than he. She might have been ten. The plump wife was sitting next to the outside door. The major was pinched in between her and the Captain.

Roy was uneasy. He had not wanted to meet that man again. Especially he had not wanted him to come barging into his family circle. How much did he know? How much would he tell?

Sykes was doing everything at a brisk rate, opening doors, calling a greeting from the lawn, making introductions. He certainly had plenty of vitality. Mid way to the cupola he spotted Roy peering from the deep shadows of the living room. The Captain's face registered only a flicker of surprise, and he handled the situation perfectly. The surprise meeting might have rattled less composed people--should one bother to recognize an adolescent when adult business is coming off, especially a kid who might bring up some unpleasant memory? But Sykes, after smoothly getting the adults through the screen door, quickly stepped forward and said, "Well, well, well. It's the 'possum hunter. We meet again. So nice to see you, Roy. This young fellow, Major, knows all about hunting dogs. He helped us chaperon the Cub Scouts."

That cleared up the whole problem. No second looks to see if he could read what Roy was thinking. No glances to compare him with his close relatives. Roy was recognized,

and then he was dropped.

Within seconds he was down to business. Would the house satisfy the major? Would the major be agreeable to the owners? He pointed out what terms should be settled now, and the house was rented.

"Now then," he said, "I hear you have contacted the Base about an emergency.. We are to pack and ship your things. Do you have a ride to the airport in the morning? Have you been able to telephone your husband? Do you know if he is out of surgery? Did everything go well?" Captain Sykes was getting all loose ends taken care of. Both Franche and Hattie liked him immediately.

Roy, though, was trying to find some excuse not to like him. Were odd jobs like this all he did out at the Air Base? Flyers were supposed to fly. It looked like this man was nothing but a glorified butler. He also noticed his moustache was trimmed a little too carefully. It made him look like a dandy.

Suddenly, he was gone. Oh yes, as he drove off he turned to catch Roy's eye long enough to wave politely. Politely, but not intimately, just the way an adult should dismiss a seventeen year old boy of slight acquaintance.

Well, at least, he was not bearing grudges. He was not looking at Roy as though he were a freak. Maybe Carnes had told him nothing. After all, Carnes had so little to tell. Besides Roy had made up his mind he was going to forget about the scene at the 'possum hunt.

He found it hard to forget about Sykes, however. During the afternoon a truck load of soldiers came to pack things up. Roy was left to stand to one side...There was nothing to do but

ask his sister questions. Most of them must have seemed pointless to her, and she brushed them off as minor irritations. She had been able to contact the Denver hospital and had learned Cliff was doing nicely. That was the most important thing on her mind. But to Roy something else kept pestering his mind. "Any of the details of the renting agreement had taken place out of his ear shot. He must find out exactly how the payments were to come off because in some way this house in River Terrace might lead to another meeting with Charles Sykes.

Would this Sykes person have anything to do with collecting the rent? (Who was Sykes? Oh, him. Certainly not.) What if the major doesn't pay; who's going to get after him? (Don't be silly. Majors have to pay.) What if they tear up the house, ruin the garden? (They won't.) Who makes repairs? (The Major does, and we adjust the rent.) Should Roy drop by this winter to see if everything was going alright? (If you want to, but don't make a nuisance of yourself.)

He was unable to make any of the questions lead back to Charles Sykes. By sundown he had convinced himself there was no reason why he should worry about the man at all. He was a closed chapter.

It was their last night in the house. Hattie got Roy to one side and reminded him to stick to his plans. "Find the cheapest room you can, but don't stint yourself. We'll put you through this winter somehow." The next morning, as they were driving back from the airport she stuffed a five dollar bill in his hand. Her bus left at nine, and by noon Roy had moved over to the neighbors.

It was a period of freedom. Within a day or two he discovered he could come home from work as late as he pleased, go to as many movies as time and pocketbook would allow and investigate all the odd corners of Fort Boomer, the ones he had heard the gravel truck drivers talking about.

The movies, as always seemed exciting. He seemed at home in those dimly lit pleasure palaces. But by the end of the first week he was getting a little tired of sitting through them by himself. Surely he could find someone to go with him. But the only people he really knew were all separated from him by a barrier. What barrier? It was hard to tell just what the barrier was like, but it was there.

Malcolm Fox and his roommate Marion Tolliver wouldn't do at all. If he got friendly with them they would think he was trying to get in bed with them. Larry Thorpe was gone. He was behind a genuine barrier--iron bars. Roy would not allow himself to think of someone so unrelieable and two-faced as Charles Sykes. Awful barriers fenced him off, his "slick" ways, his being a Yankee, married and in the service. How could he ever drop over to his house and ask him to go to a movie?

Styles probably did not like movies. He probably considered them childish. What did Styles like? What did he do in his spare time? The last question always aroused a note of panic in Roy's thoughts, because the handsome Captain might do nothing but lie in bed with his pretty wife. But what did it matter? He was through with Styles.

With so much freedom on his hands he should do something about "growing up". What was "growing up"? The answer was easy.

It was getting himself bred. At seventeen a boy should have done it. Look at Captain Wykes. Admittedly he was much older than seventeen, but obviously he had progressed to a stage in which sexual intercourse was as natural as eating. Roy must become as practiced at it as that. He must get over being a virgin.

Yes, he must admit he was still a virgin. His two experiences with men wouldn't count. No one would consider those episodes mile stones in his life. Instead of accomplishments they were temptations he had fallen into, things best forgotten.

However, with all this spare time on his hands he should consider doing it again. A faint bit of gossip had passed his ears last summer , something said in a whisper and quickly cut off, a sentence about a cafe on Sam Bass Street where queers hung out. Too bad the whisper had faded out before he could get either the name of the cafe or its address. Nevertheless, he spent two evenings walking up and down Sam Bass Street, two miles in each direction, and he found nothing but ordinary looking hamburger joints with run-of-the-mill people eating inside.

He must give that thought up and concentrate on getting himself bred. That would be far more difficult to do, but would be more noteworthy once done. But how to go about it? The easiest way would be to go to a whorehouse. There would be no flirting, no stages of progressive temptations, no doubt about the outcome. You would just do it. Last summer's gossip about queer places had been limited to one whisper, but stories of whore houses had flown about every day. There was supposed to be one within two blocks of the Greyhound bus station. The

truck driver who told about it said you couldn't miss it. You walked uphill from the terminal, turned right at a coffee shop, and over a furniture store was a little hotel. The hotel was it.

Another truck driver told of a place that wasn't really a house, but you could pick up whores there, go outside, walk through an alley and rent a room in a boarding house for an hour. No questions asked. It was a restaurant out on Bowie Street called "La Fiesta". "If a man couldn't get a woman there," he said, "something was wrong with him."

As his last week of freedom was drawing to a close he decided he would act. Not another day would pass before he would get himself bred. First he scouted out the hotel near the bus station. He could not be sure he had found the right place because the trucker's directions could not be followed. The only coffee shop near the Grayhound depot was one inside the depot itself. Yes, two blocks away was a hotel, the well-known "Pioneer", a swank, twelve story building, the pride of Fort Boomer. That obviously was not the one he had heard about. The only hotel which fitted the trucker's description was one five blocks away. On the street level there was nothing but a door and a sign, "Grand Southern Hotel". When he opened the door he saw a flight of stairs with another door at the top. Through its glass panel he could see nothing but the ceiling of a hallway which had one white, frosted glass fixture in it. What were all these stories he had heard about red lights? This place didn't even have a pink one, and mid way up the stairs he began to wonder, just what should he ask for when he got beyond that door? Should he brazenly ask for a woman? Should



he rent a room and hope that one would show up? This might mean he would be wasting money, something he had been doing too much of lately. What if the whore made fun of him, taunted him that he was not a man? What if she even guessed that he was homosexual?

No this place wouldn't do. He would try "La Fiesta". La Fiesta was much easier to find since it was in the telephone directory. Thirty minutes away by city bus it was located in a newish part of town, almost the outskirts. If it was a whore house it was certainly not in a shady neighborhood. New residence house were going up on all sides, not a single one of them looked like a boarding house. Nor could he spot a clear-cut alleyway near La Fiesta's ample parking area. Here there could be no slipping out a back door and dodging clandestinely between garbage cans. The restaurant itself was an octagonal affair with plate glass windows on all sides. You peered past neon decorated eaves to booths and a horseshoe-shaped counter. Nicely dressed couples were coming and going from the two brightly lit entrances. The well-dressed ladies who hung on to their escort's arms could not be whores. Something was wrong.

For one thing it looked so expensive he doubted if he could even afford a hamburger. Just how would contact with a lady-of-the-evening be made? What if he nibbled on an expensive hamburger for an hour and nothing happened? Again he would be wasting money.

He was about to turn around and catch the bus back to the central part of town when he heard a woman's voice call, "Hello there. Aren't you Roy Grover?"

The voice came from one of La Fiesta's parking stalls, and a second later he was able to spot which one. A few yards away a well-dressed woman was calling to him from the driver's seat of a five year old Chrysler. The hand she waved toward Roy was gloved, her eyes were bright, and she seemed eager to talk to Roy. In another second she had gotten out of her car and was walking toward him. Sophisticated, poised and fifty-ish she could not possibly have been a whore.

"You're Malcolm's friend, aren't you?" she said.

Then Roy noticed another woman had been sitting in the front seat beside her. She couldn't possibly have been a whore either. That soured and out-of-shape creature would have starved to death. She was Vinnie Dollop. Her stout body seemed settled on the car cushion as solidly as an Egyptian pyramid. Her foundations were so well planted she had difficulty turning her body so she could see where her companion was going. All she managed to do was twist her neck far enough backwards so that out of the corner of her eye she could squint at Roy. When she saw him her eyes blinked.

No doubt if she had been younger and more flexible she would have been springing out of the car to get within an inch of the two persons who were about to meet. But, no, all old Vinnie could do was turn her neck and blink her eyes.

The well-dressed woman's smile was as warm as her carefully modulated voice. She stretched out her gloved hand to touch Roy. "I'm Dolores Fox. Malcolm's father was my husband's brother. Both brother and husband are gone now. Vinnie, Malcolm and I are left alone. Vinnie and I were just about to drop into La Fiesta and have a snack. So surprising to meet

you here. We had just been talking about you. Don't you come in with us and share a snack?"

Confusion. His mind had been on something so different he hardly knew what to say. Women like Malcolm's aunts weren't even supposed to know of such places as La Fiesta. But he had already made up his mind that the truck driver had been completely mis-leading about all his shady tips. However, another problem remained. He was again running into Malcolm's circle of acquaintances. He had just as soon forget them. Still, he found himself agreeing, not only to share a snack, but to help get Vinnie out of the car with her grunts, moans and bad feet.

Vinnie would lunge herself forward an inch in the car seat, take a look at Roy, thrust forward again, pause to study Roy's face, then rise up some more. During the whole process of getting her out of the car you could see she was studying the situation.

Not long ago she had snatched her "ward" out of the front seat of Grover's car, a very un-diplomatic maneuver. Now she was being forced into socializing with a person she had treated high-handedly. Was he going to forget it, or was he going to rub some more salt into the wounds?

Dolores was talking such pleasant chatter that pouring more salt was impossible. By the time they had Mrs. Dollop out of the car it was clear, or almost clear, that the snack would go nicely.

Vinnie had to have all attention focused on her. Once out of the car she had to get balanced on her feet--with Roy and Dolores supporting her on either side--to get her breath, to adjust the hem of her skirt, and focus her small eyes on

the hundred or so feet she would have to traverse to get to La Fiesta's entrance.

"Isn't it nice that we ran into Roy," Dolores said. "We were just talking about you, Roy."

"What's he doing here?" Vinnie wanted to know.

Roy tried not to blush, and he smiled to cover up any guilty look which might have crept over his face.

"Oh bother," said Dolores. "What does it matter. Come inside. We're both hungry after a day of odds and ends. Everybody will feel better after we eat. Isn't the weather nice? It will be so pleasant when autumn really arrives and we can get back into a nice comfortable groove."

"Let's hurry up and get to the food," said Vinnie. It turned out she could walk quite well although with a wobble. But at the restaurant's big black door she got more attention focused her way.

Roy was holding the heavy thing open. Dolores happened to pick that moment to point out its comic incongruity. "Look," she said. "The door is solid oak, two inches thick and nearly seven feet high. A truck would have to hit it full speed to knock it down. Most of the walls are just glass."

She and Roy laughed which caused him to take his eyes off of Vinnie at the moment he was closing the door. Suddenly Mrs. Fox shrieked and snatched her sister away from the door facing. Mid way through the entrance Mrs. Dollop had stuck out her hand to balance herself carelessly letting it land between the halves of the closing door hinge. A second later and her fingers would have been mashed.

"Lord," whispered Mrs. Fox. "She's the most careless thing with her fingers you ever saw. She'll stick them anywhere. It's a wonder she's gotten through fifty years of life with all ten of them in place. Well, here we are inside."

Roy had been a trifle uneasy about what they might find inside, but he soon saw they were in a stylish, but a rather artificially decorated place. The patrons seemed quite respectable.

"What's he staring at?" Vinnie asked her sister in a perfectly loud voice. "Dolores, we don't know anything about this kid. We don't know what he's up to."

"Save it," her sister said. Then she whispered to Grover, "Let's hurry and get her seated. She's in a cranky mood today. It would be just like her to throw an argument right here in the middle of the aisle." In a louder voice she said, "I see three seats at the counter. Does anyone mind eating there? Those stools have backs on them that are almost as soft as a booth."

"I will not sit at a counter," said Vinnie. "It cramps my legs."

"Oh bother," said Mrs. Fox.

Fortunately, two booths, each on opposite sides of the restaurant, became vacant at that moment. Dolores suggested they head for the nearer one. Vinnie pretended she didn't hear and said, "Oh, let's get that one over there. The sun's coming through on that side. This place has got such big eaves that it's all dark."

Dolores immediately gave in and began escorting her sister around the horseshoe counter to get to the far booth. A

couple with a baby who had entered from the other door beat them to it by a split second. Vinnie began pouting right at the mother's elbow. Dolores tried to hurry her back to the other booth before they were beaten to that one too. They barely made it ahead of an in-coming party of four.

As soon as they were seated in the red upholstered cushion Vinnie began fanning herself as though all the movement had fugged her out. But she had not much more than breathed a sigh before she sprang up from the cushion. If the table had not been firmly attached to both wall and floor she would have pushed it over. The trouble was she had sat on a puddle of liquid someone had spilled on the plush upholstery

"Oh God," she screamed. "You've made me ruin my new dress. What have you two gotten me into? We didn't need to come in this idiotic restaurant at all. Another thirty minutes and we would have been home. We could have cooked a meal there. This place is a waste of money when we are so hard up we can't even meet the payments on the piano. Now you've gone and made me ruin my dress."

A waitress came but really couldn't do much but sop up the remains of the puddle. There was nothing she could do about the big wet spot on Vinnie's backside.. Vinnie strained to get out of the booth and into the aisle where she could fret and fume in a grander style. "What was that stuff, and what was it doing on a cushion?"

The waitress played dumb, and Dolores said, "Just water."

"It is not water," said Vinnie. "It doesn't feel like water. That stuff is beer. Someone smuggled a bottle of beer

right inside and slopped it over the seat." The waitress quickly spoke up to say that couldn't be. "It's just water," she assured Mrs. Dollop.

There was nothing for Vinnie to do but ease back in the booth, sighing and groaning. "Now I won't be able to eat a thing. You've drug me in here to blow money, and it will all be wasted. How much have you got in your purse, Dolores? I have thirty three cents. That's all you'll get out of me. You'd better tell this kid he'll have to pay his own way."

Dolores ignored this jibe and urged Roy to share a large Avacado Delight between the three of them. "It's a salad," she explained. "The sauce is wonderful. Believe it or not, I heard about La Fiesta's big avacado bowls all the way over in Paris France."

Paris. A special aura settled over the booth. Roy was struck speechless. Two or three seconds passed before he realized he was staring at Mrs. Fox with his jaw slightly open.

"Paris?" he asked. Was he about to hear some details of that dream city by someone who had been there? No. He was not, because Vinnie quickly cut off that avenue of conversation. She told her sister to quit talking about that city. "We didn't have the money to go there to begin with. We don't have the money to go back there even if a war wasn't going on. And you can hear anything about food in Paris, from any where in the world. Talk like that doesn't mean a thing. I cannot eat a salad. I'm going to have a bowl of soup."

Roy scarcely heard her grumblings. He must take time to look over these two creatures. Vinnie's clothes looked like remnants from an attic trunk, but her sister's attire was

something else. Could that simple sheath like dress be a Paris creation? Good heavens, what was that broach pinned to her shoulder? All worthwhile pieces of jewelry he had ever seen were patterns in abstract design. Anything that looked like an animal was cheap, in the Mickey Mouse class. But Dolores's broach was shaped to suggest a sitting cat, and it couldn't possibly be cheap. If you looked closely you could see one of the eyes was winking, but the other one, which took up most of the design, was a glittering, pear shaped diamond. At least he supposed it was a diamond. It sparkled prismatically the way diamonds were said to do. Even if it were zircon it would have to be worth several hundred dollars, perhaps thousands. And all the time Vinnie was going on about how poor they were.

"--She won't let me look in her purse," Mrs. Dollop now addressed Roy. "Last night she hid it in her bed springs so I couldn't get to it. She will not open a joint banking account with me. The estate check is always made out to her. Yet my lawyer plainly tells me two-thirds of it is to go to Malcolm and me. I never know whether I get my share or not--"

Her ~~harangue~~ <sup>harangue</sup> was so ill-tempered and relentless it should have broken up the party at once. If anyone from Gloriona were faced with such a tirade he would feel honor bound to give back as good as he was getting, and a full scale row would break up the whole outing. At the very least Dolores should be bending every effort to wheedle her sister into politeness, and Roy should be so frightened he should be forced into making a quick excuse and leaving on the run. But he was seeing something new, and he decided at once he was not going to leave.



Dolores was not acting like someone from Gloriona. Instead she seemed so calm she might even be enjoying the situation. One minute Mrs. Fox would laugh at Vinnie, the next she would make so great a point of giving in that you could see her sister was forced to feel pangs of guilt. Now Vinnie would be ignored, the next moment she would be answered with great intelligence, and the third time she would be treated as a child. All the while Dolores was mixing in pleasant little conversational openers for Roy.

"I love the relaxed atmosphere at River Terrace. Did you enjoy your summer out there? Or maybe you would like a crowded city for a change. I remember the first time I went to New York. I was such a green kid I didn't even know how to get on a subway."

New York. Almost as fascinating as Paris. If only he could get this woman to tell him a little more about either place. If nothing else the knowledge would erase a bit of his provincialism. But more about either city was not to be. Vinnie broke in.

"Neither of us has the money to trot off to New York now," she said. "The roof needs fixing on our house. Not a shingle nail has been driven into it since Papa died. She's always trying to rent out a room, but how can we get anyone worth while when he looks up at the ceiling and sees a big wet stain right over the bed."

"Malcom told me you were going to be in dramatics this fall," said Dolores as if her sister had not spoken. "You'll be running up against our local wonder, the Fort Boomer girl

who has made a tiny dent on Broadway. Assistant director in a play that ran six weeks. What's her name? Beulah. Beulah Astor. Ah yes. It used to be Tillie Isham--"

Roy had heard of neither Beulah Astor nor Tillie Isham. "You mean--you mean she'll be in college?"

"She's got the key to the car," said Vinnie. "I can't get up and walk out of here. She won't let me back in the car."

"--Not a student. Instructor, or associate professor, or something--" Mrs. Fox turned from Roy to her sister. "When you learn to drive we can have two sets of keys made--"

"Drive, Drive," screeched Vinnie. "She won't teach me to drive--"

"Why don't you take out a little money from next month's allowance," said Dolores, "and hire a professional instructor to teach you? You know I tried to give you lessons a dozen times. We ended up going through a fence. By the way, Roy, I want to thank you for getting Malcolm started on his driving experience last summer. You'll be pleased to know he finished learning and passed his test last week. He even drove a friend's car down to San Antonio last Saturday. No mishaps at all. He's spending a little breathing spell type of vacation down there before school starts. It was nice of Vinnie to let him go down--"

Mrs. Dollop suddenly became quiet. Obviously her sister had touched on a sore spot. The waitress brought a huge bowl of salad and two small plates. The big bowl she sat in the center of the table then dished out two portions for Mrs. Fox and Roy. On her tray she had a small soup bowl left which she sat in front of Vinnie.

Mrs. Dollop complained she didn't have room to spoon up

her share. The Avacado Delight took up too much of her area of the table. Dolores suggested they trade. "Your oyster stew looks so good. How does the salad look to you?"

By this time Vinnie's peevishness was losing its sting. She turned her head to one side and looked at the pile of shredded lettuce and dressing. In a childish voice she consented to a trade.

Roy was holding he breath, all ears. A plague on Mrs. Dollop and her interrupting everything the fascinating Dolores said. This well-dressed woman in her fifties was so easy to talk to. If for no other reason a conversation with her would lead to few complications. With an older woman you wouldn't be expected to ask her for a date. You just talked. Already it was plain that his mind and hers ran along similar paths. In fact a lot of loose ends were beginning to float around toward each other in the back of his mind. Malcolm driving, for one thing. Vinnie had not succeeded in clamping an iron hand over his life. It was now beginning to be easy to see how one moment the young Fox kid could be so charming and mature and the next a backward child. He was under more than one influence at home.

And perhaps under influences not at home. San Antonio. That was where Larry Thorpe was. He had not been able to follow the details of that man's arrest in the papers, but he had found one paragraph that said his trial would come up in a month, something vague about a delay. Malcolm had said he did not know Larry Thorpe, but Malcolm might be a skillful liar. A twinge of jealousy passed through his head. Stupid and awful to be jealous. The worst of all the passions.

Dolores looked as though she had conquered jealousy while her sister had the ear marks of one who had floundered under a great wave of it, and it had ruined her life long ago. Best to push thoughts of Malcolm from his mind with as much determination as he was now forcing out the lingering thoughts of Larry Thorpe.

But it would be nice if he could tie up the loose ends. Why not ask Dolores if Malcolm knew the man who was being tried for burglary? Then go one step further and ask if she had known the boy who was shot in the hunting accident last year? But how could he ask these unpleasant questions without seeming to pry? He knew if he opened his mouth tones of eagerness would saturate his words and Dolores would suspect he had some ulterior motives. No, he must think of a way to bring up the subject in an off-hand manner. He must be as clever as Dolores herself. The conversation must be channeled in an artful way.

"--Beulah Astor. Tillie Isham," Dolores was saying. "Raised on the wrong side of the tracks in the Mexican neighborhood. Finished high school at fifteen. Long after my time. She's at least twenty years younger than I am. To see her now you'd never be able to guess where she was raised. Fits in any where; charms the birds out of the trees. She's mad about the theater. Can't talk about anything else. She can worm her way into anything. She got someone to pay her way on a world cruise and a trip to Russia. She's supposed to have studied a little while in the Moscow Art Theater. No one knows how long. I happen to know she hardly speaks a word of Russian. Ah, they talk of the Midas touch and silver spoons in the mouth. But such notions are myths. If you know what to look for you can

see patterns that lead to these phenominal successes. You'll have to learn to keep your eyes open, Roy. You're getting into a rough field."

Before he knew it they were through eating. Dolores had dropped the information that they had been summering in Paris in 1939, and they had gotten out just before war was declared. Vinnie filled in with the fact that they would not have been able to go anywhere if their lawyer had not unexpectedly collected a debt their dead husbands had written off as worthless long before they had even made out their wills. Roy learned that at one time, it must have been years ago, Dolores had sung in grand opera. Just where and for how long he could not make out. But he suspected this woman was long since out of touch with the professional end of her art. It made him seem a little bit superior to her. He must be careful to keep from becoming a has-been.

Now all three were rising up from the booth ready to leave. Vinnie was demanding help to get out. She was now so subdued that she even thanked Roy for letting her lean on him as she lurched out from the cushion. Grover volunteered to pay for his share of the check which made Mrs. Dollop that much more agreeable.

Dolores was saying it had been very pleasant. "Where are you going to stay this winter? Have you found a place to room? We have a tiny little apartment over our garage. Unfortunately we live so far from the University that you would have to catch the bus to get to the campus, but we take that into consideration, and our price is lower than most. Ah well, you'll want to look around, I'm sure. But if you cannot find something suitable

close-in, you might think of us two old ladies and their extra room."

There it was. Now it was clear why Mrs. Fox had called to him so cheerily when she saw him gawking about in the parking lot. The charming woman with the expensive broach, who had been to Paris and New York, wanted to rent a room. Roy thanked her but did not commit himself. A tiny apartment with two old ladies would not mean going to college in style. There was also his resolve to stay away from Malcolm.

But soon the snack would be over, and he had not found a way to steer the conversation to their nephew's possible connection with Thorpe. If he was ever going to tie up those loose ends he would have to do so now. He had thought of a way to pose the questions with finesse. He would pretend he already knew what kind of "trouble" Malcolm had had, the "trouble" which Vinnie had blabbed about so loudly last summer. He would pretend he knew it was a hunting accident. If he were completely off track he need only claim someone had fed him the wrong story.

"How is Malcolm's wound? Is he feeling well?" he asked.

To his surprise neither of the ladies so much as blinked an eyelid. He had hit the nail squarely on the head. "Oh yes," said Dolores. "He's been quite healthy this summer. Last year's mishap seems to have cleared up nicely. You can see for yourself he no longer walks with a limp. I'm surprised you ask, because I had thought Malcolm had forgotten all about it. But, of course, you never completely forget about getting shot in the thigh. Well, Roy it's been pleasant. Are you sure we can't drive you some where? You'll be bumping in to Malcolm this winter I suspect. He's decided to continue with his pre-law

degree. We think he's not dedicated enough to set his sights on any of the arts. But he'll have time to try out for a few plays in his spare time. Oh, it's too bad we lose sight of our goals so easily. But you don't want to hear an old woman's regrets."

She actually said, "Au revoir" instead of good-bye. All the way home Roy was imagining what the missing parts to his collection of information might be. It was unlikely Malcolm's little "breathing spell" in San Antonio was being spent in the zoo. Oh well, if he were making a fool of himself visiting the county jail let him do so. Still, when he got home he searched the paper for any follow-up news on the burglary arrests. That night he found nothing, but two days later he happened on a brief paragraph on a back page. The trial of the two service men accused of breaking and entering was to be postponed for a month. The reason for the postponement was not given, nor did it tell whether they were out on bail.

Poor Thorpe. But it was now time for Roy to face facts about his coming year's costs. He must register next week. His mother had sent him another letter with five dollars folded inside along with her pleas that he do his best the coming winter.

But he did not get far in his figures before he realized he was going to have to economize. He must find a cheap room, and he would do well to eat at a boarding house that served only two meals a day. The third one he could buy more economically in the grocery store, cold cuts, fruit, and ready prepared things that he could snack on quite cheaply in his room.

The day before registration, when the campus was crawling

with students snapping up the remaining bargains in housing, he was lucky enough to run across something cheap. He could get a room and three meals a day for a mere twenty-two dollars a month, at least six dollars cheaper than any other comparable rates. Not eating out of cans, no getting used to a strange roommate, he would have a front bedroom to himself in a private home.

His new landlady's name was Mrs. Laudermilch, and she spoke with a slight German accent. "No," she explained quickly, "I wasn't born in the old country. Minnesota. Are your Mama and Papa Tcherman?" she asked. "No? Well, it makes no difference. I don't expect to find many Tchermans this far south."

At the time Roy thought it was a little tactless of her to make such a point of her Teutonic ancestry while Hitler was sinking American merchant ships. But her first meal turned out to be delicious, and the quantity was generous.

The first few weeks of classes passed, and he knew he had made an excellent choice of major subjects. Almost from the first day he found himself at home in the Drama Department. The instructors seemed to have minds that ran along the same channels as his. He picked up the drift of things easily, and it was such a relief to be in a group where he could be as ebullient as he wished.

One day, toward the last of September, he ran into Malcolm. Roy hardly recognized him. The kid had gained at least fifteen pounds since the day his aunt had whisked him out of Cliff's car, and he seemed in the best of spirits. "Why, hello, Grover," he said. From his assured manner you would think it



had been only a day or two since they had parted and there had never been an embarrassing moment in his life. For a second or two he politely asked about Roy's sister and the brother-in-law who had been so sick. But he quickly passed on to something that interested him more. "Do you notice anything different? I'm on a crash program to gain weight. Ovaltine for breakfast and a night-cap. At least three milk shakes a day."

The next moment he had patted Roy on the back and invited him into a nearby soda fountain for another milk shake. The pat on the back was something else that was new. Before, Fox seemed to avoid bodily contact with anyone, except the time he was forced to squeeze into the front seat with his aunt.

It turned out he did not have money to pay even for his share of the soda fountain spree, and when Roy pulled out his pocket book to pay he stole a side glance at what was inside. Outside on the sidewalk Fox asked to borrow five more dollars. Something about the straightforward approach made it impossible to refuse. "I get my allowance in two days," he said, implying he would re-emburse everything then.

Days melted into weeks and nothing had been paid back. In the middle of October Fox asked to borrow another five. Again, he hit Roy at the precise psychological moment when refusal would be out of the question. The first of November the right psychological moment came again, and Grover was out still another five. "If you could make it six I would be extremely grateful," Malcolm said. Another dollar changed hands. "Could you possibly spare one more, making it seven?" Roy loaned him the seventh one. "I'm extremely grateful," said Fox.

He looked as though he meant it.

Roy was angry at all this begging, and even more put-out at his own gullibility. While he was doing well in all his classes he was facing signs of coming troubles in other areas. The money he had saved last summer was almost all gone, and the "bargain" room and board arrangement with Mrs. Laudermilch was running into some snags. The big meals and hausfrau cooking had dropped in quality and quantity, and Mrs. Laudermilch herself hadnot turned out to be amiable.

The hand writing was on the wall. He could not spend the whole year leading the life of the pampered college student with generous checks from home. Even cutting down on spending and loaning wouldn't save him from coming financial disaster. His mother's occasional five dollar bills wouldn't do it either. He was going to have to find a part time job.

Fortunately, odd jobs were easy to get. The draft, although still a remote menace as far as Grover himself was concerned, was snapping up young men. The ones left were finding employers much more agreeable.

The University had a bureau for student job placement in connection with Dean Fugger's office. A severely dressed woman in one of the bureau's tiny offices interviewed Roy to determine the exact sort of work he was fitted for. She was so meticulous you would think he was asking for a lifetime career, "You're difficult to size up," she told him. "What can I send you to? You show no interest in mechanical ability. You're taking no business courses. What can I do with you?" She tapped the desk with the application card he had filled out and sighed. "Well, I'll take a chance on sending you to a

printer. How does that sound? And if I were you I'd go easy on telling him you're a drama major."

The printer, she explained, was a Mr. Richards who specialized in running off quarterly reports for stockholders in various oil companies. "Above all," she said, "Richards has to have someone conscientious. He wants someone with drive. He doesn't want to have to stand behind your shoulder and direct your every move. You have to be honest, dependable and keep your mouth shut. His office is located in an alley a half a block from the First National Bank building. Could you get there in half an hour?"

Roy was sure he could, and some twenty minutes later he was hurrying along the sidewalk in front of the Doric columns of the First National Bank. Something in his side vision attracted him. With only ten minutes to spare he really didn't have time to stop and gawk, but he did.

A Farnsworth truck was pulled up at the curb opposite the bank's front door. You often saw Farnsworth trucks in front of banks. They belonged to an armored car firm, boxy looking things painted silver with the driver's cab separated from the heavy metal, bullet-proof bed. Four little windows about the size of ladies' vanity mirrors were on each side of the back part.. "Farnsworth Armored Service" was printed in proportionally small letters under each one. As usual this one had a crew of three men identically dressed in snappy looking gray uniforms.. One man, probably the driver, was now at the back of the parked vehicle unloading bags of money. The other two were standing on either side of the brass and glass

front doors. Each had drawn his pistol from holster, and, in the approved manner, was holding it upwards at a forty-five degree angle.. Should something fishy appear in range they need only lower the barrel slightly, and you were under the bead. It made the Farnsworth firm appear very professional and non-nonsense.

The man holding the pistol to the left of the front door was Larry Thorpe. His mouth was set. His blue eyes were looking straight ahead. His figure was still superb, if anything, more slender than it had been last June. But he no longer smiled the faintest bit, much less showed his dimples. Of course that would be in keeping with his pose of hair-triggered alertness. But his face seemed older. Last summer he had looked thirty. Now he seemed closer to forty. Nervous tension, or was it a hungry look about his face, aged him ten years..

Roy gasped. Thorpe did not bat an eyelash but kept looking straight into a crowded distance. Of course, in a case like this he would not be expected to show the slightest sign of recognition. There was nothing for Roy to do but get his breath and quickly walk on. At the corner he glanced back. A woman wearing a wide-brimmed hat and stringing two children after her blotted out the view of the left side of the door. But a bit of gray cap and tip end of the gun were visible over her shoulder. That and the toe of a black, highly polished shoe to the left of the woman's skirt was all he could see of Larry Thorpe.

He turned the corner and saw the sign, "Richards Friting" over a little door by the alley. All during the interview with the pudgy Mr. Richards he found himself badly rattled. If workers hadn't been so hard to find he probably wouldn't have

been hired. "What chew takin' out at school?" asked Mr. Richards while Roy was thinking; Larry Thorpe. His one-time lover was no longer in jail. Had he gotten a suspended sentence? Had a smart lawyer gotten him off, or had his wife drug their two children into the court room the day his sentencing came up? Probably the latter.

The ex-bus driver was also out of the Air Force. Of course he would be--dishonorably discharged because of the burglary. But now he was working for the impressive looking Farnsworth Service. He had to be living some where back in the Fort Boomer area. Perhaps at Fristine? But their house out there had burnt to cinders. Wherever he lived the chances were he was still glued to his wife and two children, one of them spastic.

How had he gotten a job guarding money with a police record? Roy did not know what kind of men applied for jobs with armored car services. Maybe the draft was forcing changes of policy in that field too. Even in normal times you heard rumors that law enforcement jobs were not always filled with saints. You get broken as a cop and you become a private detective--or maybe an armored car guard. Roy didn't know, but he couldn't get the thought of Larry Thorpe being back in Fort Boomer out of his mind.

He was being hired. Mr. Richards heaved his weight from one side of the stool to the other. "Tomorrow is the eleventh. There's eight hours of work down here for you if you want to do it. You're out of school that day, ain't you? And you ain't going to try to go back to your mama on just one day holiday, are you? After tomorrow I can keep a man busy two hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays and six hours on Saturdays. What do ya

think?"

Roy's thoughts had wandered on to a topic that Mr. Richards did not need to know about. He was thinking that Thorpe's gun had been sticking up in the air like an erect penis. With an effort he forced his mind back to Mr. Richards. Yes, he could work all day tomorrow, Armistice Day.

"And what about next week?"

Next Week? Oh yes, Roy realized next week was the official Thanksgiving week. The president had again moved Turkey day one week ahead from the traditional last Thursday in November. Only ten days from now the University would be closed for a two day recess. Why, he had bungled things badly. All fall he had planned on going back to Gloriona Thanksgiving. Here it was only ten days off and he was caught nearly flat broke.

Yesterday he had paid Mrs. Lauder Milch twenty-two dollars for another months room and board. But the day before that he had foolishly handed over the seven dollars to Malcolm Fox.

In a confused flurry of thinking he wondered if there was a fantastic connection between that loan and Larry Thorpe being back in town. Could Malcolm possibly be turning over his borrowed money to the ex-bus driver? A wild thought. Get it from his mind.

More important, he had only some loose change in his pockets. Unless his mother came through with an emergency hand-out he wouldn't even be able to make it home for Thanksgiving. At any rate he was not so bad up that he would agree to working that important Thursday and Friday in a printing shop. No, he would

not let Mr. Richards talk him into working over-time other than Armistice. He stated definitely he was going home Thanksgiving.

His new employer was not impressed with Grover's reverence for Turkey day. "If you work those four days your pay check will be fat when you get it," he said. "You might as well stay in Fort Boomer and make money."

Pay check. When you get it. "How long will it be before I get paid?" he asked. He had also noted that Mr. Richards had now upped the holiday work to four days, not just two.

The printer's unshakable reply was, "One month."

"You mean at the end of November?" asked Roy.

Mr. Richards replied he did not mean at the end of November. He meant one month from tomorrow, the day Roy should start to work. "Your first pay check will be December eleventh. Might as well try to make it a big one."

No, no. Roy promised to work Armistice, but the four holidays would be spent in Gloriona.

As he walked out on the street he first rounded the corner to see if the armored car was still parked in front of the bank. It was gone. Then he began thinking. Things were going to be very tight indeed. At least he had a full month's room and board paid. Mrs. Laudermilch would not expect any more payments until December ninth. If he got a letter off today he could beg his mother into sending bus fare to Gloriona. Perhaps while he was home his mother could did up a little more spare change for him. The awkward time was going to be between now and Thanksgiving. First, the Richards Printing Company was

roughly a mile from Mrs. Laudermilch's. He had planned on riding the bus to and from work. But, he told himself, a mile is not so far. He could walk it.

Thanksgiving. He hadn't made plans for those holidays even though they were little more than a week off. Holidays, no matter how you spent them, meant money. And he was afraid an even more awkward stretch than that would fall into the one month period before Richards would shell out with money.

The first week in December the drama department was putting on a major production, nothing less than Hedda Gabler, and he was assigned to light crew. That meant for three nights he would be working with youngsters who would be blowing money on cokes, cigarettes, and trifles to relieve the tedium of backstage work. All this would be happening right when he had been trying to last a month on a few cents.

He hated to appear flat broke. In fact it was bad enough to have to confess to his fellow students that he was working part of his way through school. Most of them talked glibly of vacations in New York, spur of the moment splurges in Mexico. It seemed most of them were rich. His own prosaic, near-poverty background was embarrassing.

Roy counted his change. He had forty-six cents. What had happened to last summer's hoard? Mrs. Laudermilch and Fox had taken a lot of it, but he was afraid a big portion had slipped through his fingers. All the more reason to dig in his heels and prove to himself he could get by with a place to sleep and three meals a day. Yes, he could do it.

However, there was a pressing reason to spend a tiny bit of change right now. If he could afford a bus fare out to Pristine



he could ask where Larry Thorpe was living.. Surely, if the ex-bus driver was back in town someone of his neighbors, perhaps Reverend Gallagher at the church, would know where he was living. His first impulse was to run out there this very afternoon. Tomorrow he would begin work, and most of his spare time would be taken up.

But by the time he got to his room he had heroically forced that idea out of his mind. The fact that he was able to squelch it completely was a minor triumph of will power. It meant he was growing up, and he was proud of himself. Only a fool would spend his last few cents to ask hostile neighbors where his ex-lover was. Only a fool would dream that those neighbors would not know the exact reason why he was making such an inquiry. At last he was learning to use caution. No, he must wait. Some other time and some other chance would throw Larry across his path.

He sensed something was wrong as soon as he got inside his room, but he didn't know what. He pushed the vague feeling that something was askew out of his mind and set about to write a letter to his mother. He must get the request off if she was going to get bus fare money back to him before Roosevelt's early Thanksgiving rolled around. He pulled off his jacket to sit down at the writing desk. The room was chilly, not from the cold of real winter, but from the snap of an autumn norther. Today was a cold day, and it was the time of the year to start lighting the gas heater.

The heater wasn't there. All fall it had been sitting between the writing desk and the chest of drawers. But now there was nothing but a bare spot and the gas jet sticking out

from the wall. Even the little lever which you used to turn on the jet had been unscrewed..

His first reaction was anger. Hell, the old woman had taken out the heater.

But that couldn't be. No one in Fort Boomer rented a room without heat. The winters were not that mild, and no one in this part of the world was that stingy. He must immediately confront Mrs. Laudermilch and demand she bring it back. But he had gotten no further than the hall before his new found caution took over. Something told him a bold demand would not go over well with the old German lady from Minnesota. Also, there was an off chance she had only temporarily removed it, maybe for repairs. So by the time he got down the hall to the kitchen door he was able to pitch his voice to a level of sensible politeness.

"Mrs. Laudermilch," he called as he tapped on the closed kitchen door. Didn't she usually leave the kitchen open? He couldn't remember. "Oh, Mrs. Laudermilch. It's chilly in my room. Do you happen to have an extra heater?"

The odor of frying liver and onions drifted under the kitchen door, and the rhythmic sound of busy footsteps going between stove and cabinet was sure evidence that the landlady was at home and preparing supper. A third time he called her name. No answer. He tried the knob on the kitchen door. The door was locked.

This upset him considerably. A locked kitchen door? Unheard of. But he must not show defeat by quickly and meekly walking back to his room. Right opposite the kitchen was the

bedroom where the landlady's two daughters, Amy and Lola, slept. Amy was a telephone operator, and Lola was elevator girl in the Medical-Dental building. Both worked eight-to-five shifts, and by five-thirty both were always home. It was now ten to six. Faint whispers behind their door was further evidence they were on schedule, but that faintness was not a good sign. Usually they came home quarrelling over something with uninhibited loudness.

Roy tapped on their door. "Amy. Lola," he called. The whisperings stopped. They did not answer. Again he stated that his room was chilly. Again he heard nothing in reply.

Considerably uneasy he went back to his nippy cubical.. This was a bad turn of events. But surely he was mistaken. No landlady ever took the heater out of a student's room. Why, the dean of men would make her put it back at once.

But this thought also left Roy feeling squeemish. The dean of men was Doctor Rugger, that impressive looking fellow in the gray suit that Vinnie had so successfully used last summer. But surely that was a forgotten incident. Any college official would back him up. He might have to go chilly today, but by tomorrow he would have his heater back.

He dashed off a letter to his mother and rushed the two blocks down to Vaca street to drop it into the mail box. When he got back it was four minutes after six. Usually you could set your clock by Mrs. Haudermilch's opening the dining room door for supper. She did it at six sharp. It was not yet open, but sounds were coming from the dining room. It was some more of Amy and Lola's soft whisperings now transported from their bed room to the dining room table. The whisperings were mixed

with the muffled sounds of silver ware clattering during the course of a meal. Why, the daughters were already eating, which meant the door was closed to him.

Was the old woman trying a direct insult? If so, he had better call it on her right now. He should go to the dining room door and try to get in.

But what if he should find it locked? Should he beat on it? Should he yell to her that he wanted in? What if she didn't let him in? Automatically his hand went to his pocket and tapped the few cents he had left there. It made him stop and think.

Oh rubbish. His landlady couldn't be as nasty as that. He had paid for a month's room and board. Never had he heard of a college boarding house turning out a student. The girls eating early could only mean something special was coming off. It would be childish to make a scene over that.

He had just as soon not eat with the girls anyway. During the two months he had been here he had yet to find a way to open a conversation with those two thick-heads. The first week here he had asked each of them if they liked to dance. Of course he expected this to lead to their teaching him how to do the latest steps, tangos, rumbas, any step whatever, because he didn't know how to dance at all. It didn't lead anywhere. Each one looked blank and said they didn't dance.

Did they like the Eddy Cantor radio program? Another embarrassed pause before Lola answered they didn't have a radio. Neither were they interested in movies, and they had never heard of the legitimate theater. He couldn't find out what they did

besides work, eat, sleep and fuss at each other. It was really a noteworthy meal when he got either of them to talk about the weather. He had just as soon dine alone.

At six twenty-seven the daughters filed out of the dining room, and at six-thirty Mrs. Laudermilch tapped on Roy's door. "You can eat now," she said.

At six thirty-one he was sitting down at the dining room table. Yes, tonight things were different. Instead of places for four there was a place for one set at the lonely spot at the head of the table. No bowls, platters nor bread dishes were spread out family style over the table. Even the big white table cloth was missing. Only two little doilies, one in the center, the other under his plate, covered any portion of the polished dark walnut table top. The one in the center had a small glass vase on it which held an artificial rose. The one at his setting held his plate, his silverware, a glass of water and a side dish with one slice of home made brown bread on it. Mrs. Laudermilch, instead of leaving his helpings in bowls, had dished them out by the spoonfulls on his blue willow ware plate. She had left him two sausages, boiled until the skins burst, a tablespoon of sauerkraut, perhaps two tablespoon fulls of green beans and a pat of butter. This was all the food you could see in the whole dining room. It didn't look like there was going to be any second helpings.

"Amy and Lola are going to a party," she said. This statement could be an explanation of his being locked out of the six o'clock serving. It was the only one he was to get. Mrs. Laudermilch had moved the brown walnut rocker out of the corner a foot or so and now sat in it and rocked gently with

her hands folded in her lap. Often she felt compelled to be with him during his meal, and today was one of those occasions. There she sat, the window light falling on her graying hair which she had wound up in two buns covering both her ears.. She wore a cotton dress of solid, dark blue color. A white apron was on top of this. She rocked her chair gently. The fact that it did not squeak but moved in complete silence over the spotless linoleum floor was futher eveidence of how well she kept her household in repair. The dining table, with hardly any scratches on it, was heavy and old fashioned with big knobby ornaments at its many jonts and legs. Heavy dark sideboards stretched around three of the dining room's walls. They seemed to crowd in on the table. But they had no glass doors nor open shelves that could display dishes. All their compartments were solid woodwork which were always kept locked up. Often Roy wondered just what was behind them and suspected the sideboards held no dishes at all but general family junk collected over the years.

Once she had unlocked one of the tiny bottom drawers and slipped out a fat black family album. It was a meal when neither Amy nor Lola were there, and she had sat with him while he ate. She thumbed through her album, and before she brought out his mince pie desert she had brought the black pages over and pointed out her late husband.. On an opposite page she had pointed out "Otto", her husbands brother. He was still in Minnesota working on a railroad. On other pages were "Elsa" and "Bruno" and "Frank" and "Hulda". Their relationship to her was left unclear. None of them looked like the kind of Americans Roy knew, and he wondered why she had taken the trouble to show

them to him.

Today she did not bring the album. She just rocked. "The weather's turned chilly," Roy said. This was his attempt to start a neutral conversation. He had already made up his mind to avoid a confrontation about today's irregularities. He could do that when he had more money in his pocket. But his words were no sooner out than he realized the reference to chilliness was getting close to the business of the missing gas heater. Mrs. Laudermilch moved at once to that point.

"Amy's got a cold," she said. "I put your heater in her room."

Roy cut into one of the sausages. He knew Mrs. Laudermilch's terse explanation would not hold water. Amy and Lola probably already had a heater in their back bedroom. Almost every bedroom in Fort Boomer had a heater in it, and if she took one out of Roy's room she should put one back in a few days. Should he remind her of this? Again he felt of his pocket and decided he had better not.

"Your papa lives in Grass Prairie, doesn't he?" said Mrs. Laudermilch.

Roy stopped cutting at his sausage and became very still. He had told her he was from Gloriona, Oklahoma. Never once had he mentioned his father, and he had gotten no letters from him since he had been here. But in several of his mother's letters Hattie had dropped the suggestion that Roy should write his father or someone else in Grass Prairie if he got short on funds. The only way his landlady could know of Ted Grover's whereabouts was from reading his mail.

This was terrible. Mail, like your wallet, was a sacred inner sanctum that only heinous clouts defi ed. And if you were so crude as to violate it you were always careful not to let anyone know you had done so. Now, here was Laudermilch dropping the weather and talking about a subject she could know about only from reading his mail. He paused to look at her, his eyes wide and his jaw sagging. She seemed not to notice his surprise but kept her gaze fixed on an indefinite space some where between the ruffle on her apron and the upper most knob of the dining table's leg. She continued rocking.

"That's up in Oklahoma, isn't it?" she said. Roy was not yet over his astonishment and could think of no reply to this bland question. His landlady did not wait for a reply. "They've got a lot of Indians up there, haven't they?"

While Roy was regaining his composure he did some quick thinking. All this bearing down on where his father lived meant she was trying to start an argument. The argument would not progress very far before she would say something like this: "If you don't like it move out." Where would that leave him?

So he stammered, "Why yes. I'm part Indian myself." His tincture of Indian blood was always good for a surprise comment from an unsuspecting person. It usually caused them to get friendly and start talking about their own ancestry. Even Mrs. Laudermilch's ~~Tutons~~ up in Minnesota would make better conversation than the possibility of his sleeping out in the street.

"Hmm," she said. "I don't think you're much Indian. Your mother can't be much Indian, any way."

What on earth could Mrs. Laudermilch know about his mother?



Nothing except what she could fill out from devouring every comma of his mail. Probably from Hattie's copious burblings about such big wigs as Luther Blair the landlady had decided she could not be an Indian.

Suddenly she was off on another topic. "You don't know Dr. Rugger, do you?" she asked in her steady voice. "He's the dean or a big man of some sort at the University. He's Tcherman too, you know." Mrs. Laudermilch pronounced the Dean of Men's name in a strange way as though it rhymed with "new gear."

Roy quit eating again. He had never thought of this possibility. Dean Rugger, the big man he had seen so briefly and unpleasantly last summer, must be nothing but an ordinary American. If he had any German ancestry at all he couldn't possibly let that influence his relations with the students, especially not in times like these. But why was Mrs. Laudermilch bringing this point up right now? Good heavens, Rugger might be a secret traitor of some sort, belonging to a local German "Bund".

Impossible. The old woman must be pulling an enormous bluff to try to scare him. She must have read enough of his mother's letters to find out he was running short of money and was putting the bite on him when times were hard. If so, he had better bluff back.

"I've got a job," he said. This would let her know he might have some money coming in.

"Do you?" she asked. "When do you get paid?"

This caused Roy to stammer again. "I--I can get an advance."

Mrs. Laufermilch laughed at this. "Can you?" she said.

Oh good heavens, the woman must have found some way to slip into his pockets and count his money. But how could she know he had just been hired by a man who did not give out advances? Again she must be bluffing. But if so, she was going to carry it even further.

"Well, if you've got a job that'll be tchust fine. You can get up early to go to it. Amy's changed her hours. She's going to start to work at seven in the morning. So from now on breakfast will be at six o'clock. If you aren't at the table by five minutes after I won't have time to serve you anything."

No doubt about it. This woman was trying to get rid of him. Roy squirmed in his chair. It was true he was paying at least five dollars a month less than other students paid for room and board. If the landlady had found out after two months that she couldn't make ends meet it was only natural that she would want out of her deal. But why didn't she just raise the rent? Maybe it would be smart of Roy to offer to pay a little more, say twenty-five dollars a month instead of twenty-two. But he didn't have three dollars in his pocket right now with which he could make a "peace offering" and try to get her off his back. All he could say was, "Yes, yes. I'll be at the dining table at six sharp in the morning."

The weather turned colder during the night. The two blankets on his bed was not enough in his unheated room. His thin pair of summer pajamas didn't fill the bill either. In the middle of the night he was forced to get up, rummage through his closet and find an old pair of work pants to put on and sleep the rest of the night in them. That or freeze. He slept

very badly since he was worrying that he might sleep through his alarm and miss the changed breakfast hour. Cars kept whizzing up and down over on Vaca street, and toward morning one of them turned off that thoroughfare and parked right by Roy's window. No, the thoughtless driver didn't even park out in front of the house on Twenty-eighth Street but turned into narrow Frio Way and halted his rattling old car not more than eight feet from Roy's pillow. Impossible to drift back to sleep after such an interruption. Fortunately it was only another thirty minutes before his five-thirty alarm went off.

The girls beat him to the bathroom. What a long time it took for Amy to primp herself, and Lola was even longer at it. Roy scarcely had time to wash his face and brush his teeth before the dining room door swung open at six.

He had already figured out why he was being allowed to eat breakfast with the girls. Yes, there was the one reason that it forced him out of bed early, but the clincher was that breakfast consisted of toast, bacon and eggs. Her daughters would not mind if their individual helpings were brought to them on plates rather than generously presented on platters. For the other two meals the girls, eating at earlier shifts, would get the bowls and platters. He would get the skimpy helpings of sausage and left-overs on his plate.

It was a silent breakfast. The daughters presented themselves especially well-groomed. The changed hours had not affected the quality of their toilette in the least. Lola smiled and said, "Hello." Amy just looked at him. At the end of the meal Lola said "Excuse me." And so passed the breakfast.

He walked to work. Mr. Richards noticed this fact but did not point it out until after lunch. At noon Roy discovered the distance from the printing shop to Twenty-eighth was too far to walk as well as fit into Mrs. Laudermilch's tight hours. He made it to the table by twelve-thirty, but she was slow in bringing out his portion of chipped beef. Even by gulping it down and running he could not get back to work until fifteen after one.

"Wher'd you go for eats?" asked the extremely observant Mr. Richards. When Roy explained he had tried to make it back to his boarding house his boss asked, "Why didn't you ride the bus? No money? You didn't come to work on the bus this morning either. I saw you pounding along on First Avenue six blocks off. You broke?"

Ah, thought Roy. Now that he sees I don't even have bus fare he'll loosen up and give me an advance. "Yes, Mr. Richards," he said contritely. "I've only got forty-six cents to my name."

Mr. Richards said nothing. But at five o'clock he allowed him to work fifteen minutes over time to make up for his lost lunch schedule. And the boss slipped a quarter in Roy's hand when he went out the door. "There. That ought to get you home with enough left over to ride the bus back to work this coming Thursday." That was the extent of his generosity.

It was early to bed on Armistice night. The next morning the same rattling old car woke Roy as it again parked outside his window on Erie Way. The house's thin wall, a skimpy privet hedge, a narrow concrete sidewalk, a ribbon of curbing and that was all there was between his bed and that clanking heap of metal. There were furlongs of clear parking space on both Twenty-eighth

and Frio Way, but some country clot must stop his jalopy at five in the morning directly opposite his window. If this were to continue he would not need an alarm to get up. He would only need to get to bed early to keep from falling asleep in class. At any rate it allowed him to race into the bathroom before either of the girls. Sleepily, he stretched his hand up to the little shelf where Mrs. Laudermilch allowed him to keep his tooth brush and began his day.

As he walked to his classes that Wednesday morning he noticed the old car parked by his window was a Model A Ford. But it was not until his History of the Theater class at ten o'clock that this began to mean anything. Quite a few Model A's were still running on the streets, but didn't he know somebody who drove one of the old things? One of Rena's first-dates drove a Model A. A teacher in Gloriona kept an exceptionally well preserved specimen. He remembered it put-putting up to highschool the last year he was there.

But as Beulah Astor proclaimed the glories of nineteenth century drama Roy began to have another association with a Model A Ford. Last summer. The first day he caught the bus out at Gloriona. That funny little man named Jones was still alive. And the handsome Larry Thorpe was fixing a broken mirror under the heavy shade of the locust tree. Jones's little house was a few yards off, and beyond his house two cars were parked. One of them was a Model A.

And later on, when Thorpe ran off from his wife he had tried to deed his car over to Georgia by leaving a note in the front seat. The front seat of a Model A.

For a moment Roy became excited. What if this were Thorpe's car?

"Come on kids," said Beulah Astor. "Square off into your groups. No time to horse around. We've got to have a read through from each group before that damned bell rings at eleven o'clock. It's the death scene from Camille. Put everything you've got into it. I finally got copies run off for you. That God damned mimeograph machine up in the office isn't worth a tinker's curse. There's one copy short. Somebody will have to look on with somebody else. Come on. Come on. I haven't got time to figure out who's to get shorted. If you aren't big enough to fight a little point like that out amongst yourselves you aren't big enough to be in college. Come on. Time's short."

A girl named Merle quickly volunteered to be the one who would have to share a script with someone else. Beulah immediately pointed out Merle's shining example for the class's admiration. "Merle's volunteered to be shorted. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. That little Merle strikes me as being the most mature student in this whole department. You watch. Merle's going places."

Did the rest of the students turn a little bit green with envy when they heard such praise? If they did none of them showed it. It wouldn't do to have both Merle and Beulah mad at you. But the lack of one printed script was not the only thing that was not going to come out even in class. The characters in the death scene would consist of Camille, Armand, and Armand's father. Three to each group. Nineteen students in

the class. Three goes into nineteen six times with one over. Beulah did not scream in her frog-like croak that another mature student would have to make a sacrifice and not read at all. All nineteen students looked at each other with slanted eyes. The groups were slow to form.

"Come on. Come on," said Beulah. "Get the lead out. What's the matter with you? Oh. Somebody's going to have to be left out again today." Quickly the instructress eyed the group and spotted a little blonde in one corner. Miss Astor's face broke into a smile. She advanced toward the little blonde and put her arm around her shoulder. "June, Honey," she said. "You read beautifully last time. I already know you're good. You'll be an ace and drop out today, won't you?"

June smiled and fluffed at her hair. "Why certainly," she said.

There was another set of complications in the class. Camille, of course was a girl. Armand, just as certainly, was a man as was his father. That meant six girls would read Camille. It should also mean that twelve boys would take the two male parts. But there were only two boys in History of the Theater, Roy and the slightly over-age Marion Tolliver.

Since school had begun Roy had not hit it off with Marion any better than he had during his one visit to his apartment last summer. They often looked at each other. But they seldom spoke. So today they got into different groups. Tolliver was to read Armand's father in a group that was splintering off-by a far window. Roy would read Armand in a group forming by the opposite door. That meant no one of the six groups would have a natural

balance of male to female. But at this point in mid-semester the class was well adjusted to gender unbalances in cast. Girls quickly began assigning themselves men's parts. They seemed to like it. It was only a class room.

If the Model A was Larry Thorpe's, thought Roy, it meant Thorpe recognized him when he was standing with his drawn pistol in front of the bank. That was only last Monday. By Tuesday the Model A was already parked by his window. Thorpe lost not time in learning where his one-time lover lived, and took this quaint way of getting re-acquainted.

Why should he take so round-about a way, one which could barely be called "quaint"? Why didn't he pick up a phone and call him? Better still, why didn't he come and knock on Mrs. Laudermilch's door?

The answer to that one, Roy quickly reasoned, was Thorpe was self-conscious about his recent scrape with the law. The side-wise approach was a sign of his modesty.

Olive was reading Camille in Roy's group. Olive came from Houston, probably from a family of second or third generation richness. No one in the whole University had quite the assured poise and genteel charm that she had. She was a southern aristocrat turned practical. It seemed there was no part that she could not read perfectly. Merle might be Beulah Astor's favorite, but everyone else thought Olive had the best chances of making Broadway. Her Camille was superb, and Roy had to do his best to make his Armand appear in a competitive bracket.

"Oh, Roy," said Olive. The warm tone of her voice seemed as genuine as the glint in her dark eyes. "I think you're read-



ing splendidly. Deulah will be impressed."

"Thanks," said Roy.

He must admit modesty did not seem like one of Larry Thorpe's traits. There was the sudden way he got "acquainted" under the locust tree. It was hard to tell just what went on down at San Antonio with the Air Force and the burglary, but the fact was, Thorpe was now a gun-toting armored car guard.

Beyond that Roy knew almost nothing about his ex-lover. Yes, he could jump at conclusions based on vague clues here and there, the confident way he walked, his smile, his dimples, the athletic ease with which he drove the bus--all must mean something. But exactly what? The picture of his coyly leaving a parked car by someone's window didn't seem right. Roy shook his head and told himself he was building air castles. He must be mature and forget Thorpe.

Besides, there was no reason for Larry to park his car on Twenty-eighth Street. He did not know where the Farnsworth headquarters were, but it was unlikely such a practical outfit as that was around the University.

How foolish Roy had been not to track down the location of the Farnsworth office. He should already have looked in the telephone directory, found the address and walked by it. Just knowing where Thorpe came to work every morning would be something. He could find out the hour he went to work and could manage to be around at starting time, be around and bump into him "accidentally".

It was their turn to read. Olive was coughing. The girl was so clever that with only a few moments of rehearsal she

rarely needed to look at the script. Where was Beulah Astor? Oh, there she was pacing in front of the window, Her chin tilted high, her eyes almost closed as though she were trying to soak up the extra-sensory overtones of their performance. Her left hand dangled loosely at her side, the cigarette between her nicotine stained fingers sending up a swirling column of smoke.

She threw the cigarette across the room. "My God," she rasped. "Class did you hear that? My God, that was the lousiest 'I love you' I've ever heard. You squeaked it out like a God damned fairy. Hopelessly bad. Grover, you haven't got enough talent for a walk-on in <sup>a</sup> therapy play for retarded children. It burns me up. Grover, do you realize you are living in lucky times? You're going to get a smattering of drama training by the time a whole slew of men are going to be called up to the army. In a year or two New York producers are going to be crying for fairly passable male actors. Anyone wearing pants can write his own ticket. And here you are farting around blowing a line like, 'I love you'. That is one line an actor absolutely cannot crap out on. Any audience under the sun will laugh you off the stage if you come pussy-footing out on the boards and whine out, 'I love you', the way you just did. It makes me sick to see men throw away their chances like that. Hopelessly bad. I can't stand to hear it. Someone else read this part. Merle, your groups already through. Get in there and read Armand. Let's get this thing over with."

Clive, true to her practical, genteel way, did not even look in his direction as Grover slinked off the stage. Perhaps

later she might come around and, if not offer her sympathies, at least admit she had been wrong about Beulah's liking his performance. More likely she would pretend the outburst had not occurred.

Beulah Astor. At mid semester many of the students were beginning to be disillusioned about her. Back in September when she blew into the University for the first time, she seemed like one of those rare people who could do anything she wanted to with her life. She had been every where, and if she had not already done every thing, her conquest of the remaining challenges seemed just around the corner. Vitality foamed from her. With a wink she could melt the most haughty. Occasionally she would have to put her arm around someone to get her way. Or was it that she just wanted to put her arms some where and went ahead and did it? And with each week that passed tales of what she had already accomplished multiplied. How lucky the kids down in Fort Boomer were to have some one of her caliber for a professor.

Last July Dr. Hausa notified the board of regents he was being drafted and would not be able to teach History of the Theater for the eleventh straight year. It was rumored Beulah just happened to be passing through town and the faculty recruiter rushed to the airport and begged her to take the job.

But by mid November some were wondering if she were really university material. Her worst failing was she would not watch her language. Straining the "damn's" out of her speech, she boasted publically, was a bunch of crap she wasn't going to fool with. While she hadn't actually ripped out any hard-core cursing she pushed the boderline words with unfeminine daring.

As winter approached Roy did not know what others were thinking, but he, himself, was beginning to notice that her past achievements were stated in indefinite terms. She had been "associated" with one of Alfred Lunt's and Lynn Fontaine's productions. A Rockefeller grant paid for her trip to Russia, but just what she was supposed to study over there was never stated. He heard once that she was behind Soviet borders for only three weeks. There was also a story that she had made a trip "around the world" at the expense of some sort of dramatic fellowship. But her last job, the one she quit to teach at the University, was more definite than these. It was also less glamorous. Last year she had directed the city supported Little Theater over in Atlanta Georgia. Yes, all her productions were supposed to have been sell-outs, and the people of Atlanta were supposed to have become theater minded under her guidance, but to Roy, a Little Theater wasn't up on the levels with the Lunts or the Moscow Art Theater.

And after she had bawled him out in front of class he went away thinking worse things of her. It was obvious she was an old dyke. The word "old" wasn't carelessly thrown in. That woman was passed the bloom of youth. She might even be forty. If it weren't for her vitality she would show up just plain crude. She smoked so much that cigarettes seemed to grow on her like warts. She constantly complained of headaches, and once he had noticed a tic around her left eye.

Her blurting out that he was "hopelessly bad" was breaking one of the most sacred rules of public school teaching. An employee of the state was never supposed to be so blunt about tax-paying kids. And Roy stubbornly told himself that it wasn't

true. First, he seemed completely at home in the drama department. He hadn't been here three weeks before he saw that his mind ran along the same channels as other acting majors. With training he could show he was as good as the best. Already he had surprised everyone but Beulah by dropping his gawky ways. Miss Sorenson, the instructor for Speech and Movement of the Stage, had complemented him on his "general improvement". By working hard on backstage assignments people notice he was reliable. He could tell by the way the older students eyed him they thought he had promise. No doubt about it, this Astor woman was completely out of line.

All morning he imagined smart comebacks he should have made to her. Instead of sulking, he should have appeared contrite and lured her into showing how that pesky line should be read. Her mannish, nicotine stained vocal chords ought to have made hash out of "I love you". And why had she hit the ceiling over that particular line? The answer was obvious. The famous Beulah Astor was love frustrated. A croaking old bag like her couldn't be anything else.

However, this line of thought soon began to make him feel uneasy. The truth was he, himself, was frustrated. That damned Larry Thorpe. Why couldn't he get him out of his mind?

When he went home for lunch he noticed the Model A was still there by the window. Whoever had left it that morning must be working in the neighborhood and would not be back to drive it off until late afternoon. So, it couldn't be Thorpe's car.

But no one was walking along the sidewalks of Twenty-eighth or Erie Way. The local streets were deserted, and no one seemed to be peering from behind window curtains. There was nothing to

keep him from peeking through the windshield and reading the name on the driver's license.

By pressing his nose flat against the glass he could see the yellowed paper and the official state stamp inside a plastic folder strapped on to the steering wheel. But the typing was faded, and he could not make out one single letter of the name.

The streets were still deserted. Quickly, he tip-toed to the driver's door and pushed the handle. The owner had left the car unlocked. A glance over each shoulder. No one was coming.

Yes. By bending down in an awkward position he got the light right so he could read the dim letters. He was inside Larry Thorpe's automobile.

The old address out in Pristine had been lined out with a fountain pen and a new one inked in above it. But the lettering was so blotty it was difficult to read. By squinting he could make it out. "Peach Tree Lane". And the figures could not be anything but "2326". Larry Thorpe's new address was 2326 Peach Tree Lane. He knew about where it was, in one of the new additions south of the lake.

Inside the house he saw the closed dining room door and heard the girls eating behind it. It would be a good fifteen minutes before they were through and he would be called in for his left-overs.

No one was using the telephone in the little niche behind the dining room door. He had ample time to glean from it all the information it was capable of yielding. Larry, of course,

was not listed. Even if he had installed a phone it would not be in last spring's directory. But the office for the Farnsworth Armored Service turned out to be on Sixteenth Street and had a house number considerably further out than his own. Strange. Why would Thorpe park his car on Frio Way and walk something like a mile and a half to work?

By mid-afternoon he was sure there was only one answer. Larry parked his car there as a part of a plan to get re-acquainted with the kid he had made love to last summer. All afternoon and that night Roy's head was in the clouds. Next morning he would get up early and "accidentally" be walking on the sidewalk when Thorpe drove up. The unlikelihood of such an early morning stroll didn't bother him. He spent his time imagining the scene. Pretended surprise on both sides. Thorpe would stick his head out the car window and say, "Well, well, well. What are you doing here?"

Next morning he was awake well before the alarm went off. As soon as his mind cleared he snapped on the light to see what time it was. Three minutes after four. The whole city seemed deserted. He couldn't hear the faintest murmur of traffic over on Vaca Street. Quickly he flipped up his window shade. Nothing. No Model A. Only a clear curb gleaming under the street light. Actually, it was a beautiful scene in a ghostly sort of way. Fort Boomer was proud of its new style street lighting. Post were higher than usual, and they sported bulbs which gave off a distinctive hue of blue. The chamber of commerce likened it to moonlight. Early that morning the scene was heightened by a reel moon still sending out clear light in the cloudless western sky. As yet there wasn't a

trace of pink in the east. But when day did break it would probably usher in clear, crisp weather.

It had been a cold night, another one in which he had eked out inadequate cover by sleeping in his work clothes. It was going to be even colder just sitting around waiting for the five o'clock arrival. But he blew on his hands, then shoved them under the cover to warm them up. The arrival he could not miss.

Just how would he pull it off? He should go to the front door, fully dressed, and pretend to be looking for the morning paper. Sometimes the paper boy missed the porch, and you had to retrieve your news from the hedge near the sidewalk. Thorpe would not know that the paper boy didn't show up until six-fifteen. It wouldn't matter if he did. Once they saw each other he was sure they would be talking about something besides headlines.

Time went by. He got out of bed, changed his night attire for fresh presentable clothes. It was cold. He sat in his chair with the blankets from the bed wrapped around him. Several times he combed his hair to make sure he would look his best. It was getting colder. A wind was stirring up. The old frame house shook from a fresh blast. He had to get his mackinaw jacket, put it on over his "Sunday" clothes, and then re-wrap himself in the blankets.

Five o'clock came, and no cars turned off Vaca. Fifty-three, and no one had parked at his window. He could hear the girls stirring back in their bedroom. In a few moments they had moved into the bathroom which separated their sleeping



quarters from his. A new set of whispers. Apparently they had noticed the light coming under his bathroom door. Probably they were gloating because they had beaten him to the shower.

Six o'clock and the dining room door opened. "Oh, you're all dressed up," said Mrs. Laudermilch. "Didn't you sleep any last night?"

The girls must be going on a diet because there was no bacon for breakfast, just scrambled eggs, oatmeal, hot chocolate and toast. Roy decided he would make his answer to her question kill two birds with one stone and get in a plug for a heater. "It was so cold I couldn't sleep," he said. "When the wind hit I had to dress and sit in the chair with the blankets wrapped around me."

Mrs. Laudermilch didn't answer. The rest of the breakfast passed in silence.

The Farnsworth office on Sixteenth street turned out to be in a peculiar location for a firm using automobiles to bring in money. He had assumed it would be on the street floor of a building with a big parking area, but it was on the fourth floor of a highriser set in a congested area of miscellaneous offices. Their name was on the black and white roster by the elevators, and when he got up to the fourth floor he had to make three curves in a narrow hallway before he saw the Farnsworth name on a frosted glass door.

A frosted glass door did not tell much. How big a place was it? Who worked there? If the drivers had to report to work in such a building as this how did they get to their

armored cars?

Boldly he tried the door knob, opened it and looked in. It was a little cubby-hole of an office, one in which you could stretch out your arms, sway a little bit and touch opposite walls. Some filing cabinets were jammed against the one window so half the light was blocked out. Right in front of them sat a lone desk with a small sized switchboard built on to half the top. On the other side of the top was a stained electric percolator which was begin ing to gurgle.

A neat looking woman sat at the desk. You could see at once she was no spring chicken, but her makeup was so well done you had to look closely to even guess her age. Probably she was a healthy fifty. One of the lights on the switchboard went on, and she turned to speak into a mouthpiece which muffled her words. At the same time she managed to smile at Roy to let him know she would soon be glad to take care of whatever was on his mind.

Roy did not give her the chance, but muttered, "Oh, I thought this was Doctor Flynn's."

She edged her lips away from the mouthpiece and said, "Dr. Flynn? He's one floor up. This is the fifth floor. Is there anything I could do for you?"

She seemed eager to get business. Obviously she was the wife of the owner of a one-horse firm. The firm made most of it's contacts by telephone. She was the pleasant voiced contact. God knows where the armored cars were garaged. Roy did not yet know any more about Larry Thorpe.

Late Saturday afternoon, when both school work and the

toil at Richards' was finished he broke into his seventy-one cents to take the bus out to Peach Tree Lane. It was seventy-one cents because he not splurged the two-bit advance on rides to work, but had walked and saved it. He had much rather use the money to get a look at number 2326.

He had never been in the new addition in the south-of-the-lake area. All he knew about it was the real estate ads often appearing as big spreads in the Sunday paper. As the bus turned into an area of curved, newly paved streets he was surprised to see he was entering a more prosperous looking neighborhood than he had expected.

He did not know how to judge a house with a speculator's accuracy, but these ready-made homes looked considerably better than the one Cliff and Blanche had bought in River Terrace. Instead of one bed room most of them looked like they had at least two, and there were some extra frills like bay windows and a porch which extended over the driveway. It seemed that at least two in each block had the new style garage built right on to the house. There was an odd thing though, you couldn't see a single fireplace chimney in the whole area. The builder had skimped on that part. However he had made up for it by putting in shrubbery and even lawns. As you drove along the streets everything looked green and fresh. There was none of that homestead look of houses set down in the weeds of last year's field that you saw out in that new addition by the air base. The area wasn't designed with the rich in mind, but it looked so well-scrubbed and neat.

All at once the bus driver pulled to the curb and called out, "Who wanted Peach Tree Lane. Some kid wanted Peach Tree

Lane."

It made Roy mad to be called a kid. However, the excitement of knowing he was now near Thorpe's house made him overlook this indignity from a grumpy driver. As he stepped out into the sidewalk, which was so new the color was still the blotched mottle of uncured concrete, he tried to walk with the casualness of someone going home to a familiar neighborhood. It didn't work too well. A dog began barking. He couldn't see where it was, but it had the shrill yelp of a nervous little animal pinned up in some back yard. Also Roy discovered the driver had let him out on a corner, and he had to glance up to the street sign to see which direction Peach Tree Lane went. The sign was of metal painted green with white letters set on top of a white wooden pole. A little brass knob capped off the two intersecting signs.

When he had first heard of this place he had assumed a developer had cleared off a peach orchard to build his houses, but since the other street was Logat Lane he realized the names out here had nothing to do with the history of the place. They were promotional decorations, like the lawns and shrubbery. He had to walk only a short ways to get to the twenty-three hundred block. By this time several dogs in the neighborhood were barking, and one little Chihuahua came out to snap at his heels. He managed to kick it off by the time he got to 2326.

He must be careful to drink in every detail as he casually walked by. No, it wouldn't do at all to go up and ring the doorbell. Technically he wasn't even supposed to know the Thorpes except that one of them had been in his sister's typing class,

hardly an excuse to seek them out in a far part of town. The building was one of the modern ones with the garage and living quarters all one unit. Someone had left a tricycle in the driveway, one of the few signs of disordered litter in the whole neighborhood. Also the garage door was carelessly left open, and you could see the sides were lined with accumulated junk. If the Thorpes had been burnt out in Pristine they still had managed to get enough things together to overflow in the garage.

For example there was a child's play pen folded up and stuck against the wall so it showed clearly in front of the garage's only window. The pink and blue wooden bead decoration looked fresh and new. Roy gasped as he recognized what this was for. Out in Pristine a spastic child had been precariously balanced inside one. Of course they had had to buy a new one when that one was burnt up. It would be years before that child would be able to out grow it.

Even more surprising than the all the new looking clutter was a new looking car. Wherever the Model A was it was not at home in their garage. A one year old Ford was there. A shame. They had let its black paint get covered with dust, and was that a dent on one of the fenders? Any way, they must own two cars.

Now he wished he could stop and stare at the house. But he must keep walking by. Two doors up another dog bounced out to challenge him. Strangers rarely walked around the streets of this refined looking neighborhood. It would certainly be a nice place to raise kids. A family area. Roy was feeling ill at ease. If he hurried he could get back to the place where he had left the bus and catch the driver on his return

trip. If he hung around here Georgia might spot him. Even if Larry was the one to stick his head out the window to see who the dogs were barking at it did not mean he would rush out to greet Roy. All this respectable domesticity had thrown him off balance. He wanted to be out and away.

Yes, he got back to the bus stop in time to catch it coming back. The end of the line couldn't have been far off.. Hardly ten minutes had elapsed since the sour-faced driver had let him out. He was still disgruntled. "Well, you didn't stay here very long, did you?" he said.

On his way back to town Roy's case of nerves cleared up. He became disgusted with himself for going into a panic merely from seeing that Thorpe was living in a house like the ones seventy-five percent of young married people were occupying. Also it was silly of him to think that he was somehow ostracized from their way of life. Surely he could find an excuse to go visit them. After all Blanche had thought very highly of Georgia. He could pretend that she had written asking about her former pupil.

Except that Georgia must know about the twenty-five dollars he had so foolishly sent. And if he ever knocked on her door, no matter what excuse he gave, she'd be thinking of that anonymous letter when she looked at him. Still he kept imagining himself boldly calling at her house. He must find some way to do it.

Sunday morning he awakened at some indefinite early hour. It was still dark, no sign of day break. Why had he awakened so early? On Sunday Mrs. Lauderwilch would have no excuse to

force her household to a six o'clock breakfast. She would have to drop back to her usual seven-thirty time. But here he was wide awake at some undetermined hour. The thing that awakened him was the running motor of an old car, that and headlights were shining on his cloth window shade. Somebody was again parking at the curb on Eric way.

Instantly, he threw off his bed clothes and flicked on the light. Where were his pants? Where had he put them when he took them off last night? Usually on the back of his chair. They weren't there. Madly he rushed about the room to find them. Seconds counted. It would take only seconds for Larry to cut off the motor, open the car door, and walk away from his Model A. Botheration, he must search in his clothes closet for a different pair.

There was only time to grab the first ones his hands fell on, a pair of bright green woolens that he almost never wore. The meckinaw covered much of them, and in the dark the color wouldn't matter.

It was, indeed, the Model A, and, as it turned out, there wasn't much need for him to pretend to be looking for something. He had hardly tip-toed out the front door when he noticed someone was stretching across the little car's front seat and waving at him.

It was not Larry Thorpe. The only person in the car was a woman, and the quick fluttering motions of her gloved hand indicated she was in distress and probably needed a man to do something with the car. Naturally she was waving. If she had called to him at such an hour in the morning irate neighbors

would have thrown open windows and shushed her quiet. However, her motor, which for some reason she had left running, was racing enough to disturb all but the heaviest sleepers.

Her signals for help were so insistant he didn't have time to stop and think. So, with his untied shoe laces flopping about his ankles he hobbled over to the car. When he reached the driver's window he could see the woman was rather well dressed, a conservative skirt and jacket. Around her neck was a bright scarf, a touch of color which made her look stylish. You would wear such clothes to work if you had a desk job, perhaps that of a receptionist. It must be an odd one if it began at such an early hour.

"I can't get those wires undone," she said. "I'm afraid I'll get shocked. It's my husband's car, and he's ruined the switch key. For him it's easy to hook up a couple of wires when he wants to start and stop the motor, but I'm 'fraid I'll get shocked. I know I'm a pesky nuisance. But you look like you know all about cars. Nice looking young fellows like you have usually worked on a jillion of them. Could you just reach down and pull those wires apart so I can get this bloomin' motor cut off. It's just like me to wake up the whole neighborhood."

She talked nervously as though she might have been alone for days and had only this one opportunity to let out a flood of words. Her hands also fluttered about as though she didn't know what to do with them in the presence of others. First she doubled her left hand in a fist and held it at her chin. Then she contracted her shoulders to make herself look small and helpless. A second later she threw out the fingers of both



hands then clapped her palms together.

"Oh," she said, "haven't I seen you some where before?"

By this time Roy had also recognized her. She was Mrs. Thorpe, the over weight woman he had glimpsed once bending over a wash pot in Pristine. But what a transformation had taken place. Even while she was still sitting in the car he could tell she had a slim figure. When she got out so he could bend down to the jury-rigged switch he noticed her figure had the disciplined lines of a cruelly enforced diet. Her severe, business-like suit wasn't really a model of good taste, but it was a wide cultural chasm away from the baggy farm woman's attire she wore last summer. Something had happened. Mrs. Thorpe had taken on a new life style.

But how should he answer her question? He took time to think as he pretended to be confounded by the makeshift ignition switch. Really, it was a simple arrangement, two wires hooked together. A slight touch and they almost fell apart. But he fumbled over them as though they were a Chinese puzzle knot.

Technically, he was never supposed to have seen Mrs. Thorpe. Twice he had passed a house she was living in, but supposedly she had never noticed him either time. He had met her sister at Leon Jones's place. She had met his sister in a typing class. But they, themselves, were supposed to be nothing more than dimly remembered names to each other.

Roy knew this was not true. They had a third mutual acquaintance, her husband.

At first, as he was twiddling with the wires, he decided

to lie. "Why no. No. No, I don't believe I've seen you before."

She giggled. "It's because I've lost weight. I know you. You're Blanche Skirvin's little brother. Why, what a surprise to run into you here. A small world. You must be going to the University. I heard that you were. I sure do admire anyone who gets an education. Stick with it. Yes, I've heard Blanche speak of you a lot. You're the baby of the family, aren't you?"

Roy winced. He didn't like the word "baby". He covered up his reaction by pretending he had gotten a shock.

Mrs. Thorpe prattled on as though their mutual acquaintances were enough to make them solid members of the same clan. Any connection he might have with her husband was completely ignored. "All those old places out at River Terrace. You remember old Jonesey's house, don't you? Well, Zilla and Frank sold that whole block to the City. Tut, they made a killing off of it. That Frank. He's one to watch. How is Blanche? I heard she was out in the Rocky mountains some where. Is she all right? You do remember Leon Jones's place don't you?"

Roy got the wires undone. The Model A motor stopped. Why not be truthful? "Yes, I remember you," he said. "You're the bus driver's wife. I saw you once in your yard out in Fristine."

"Fristine," she said. "We don't live there any more. And my husband isn't driving a bus. He's with an armored car out fit. Something like a policeman." There was a note of pride in her voice, but no hint that there might be anything

unusual about her husband changing jobs. This nervous woman would not be good at discussing the unmentionable things of life.

At once Georgia volunteered to tell where she was working. "I'm a bookkeeper at the Poplars Nursing Home. Uh-huh. You must have seen the place. That big house behind the row of poplars. It's just right up here on Vaca. I'm the switchboard operator too. That is I operate it early mornings, then the receptionist takes over during the day and the night janitor does it at nights. Yes. We have to double up that way. So I have to come a lot earlier than most bookkeepers do. Uh-huh. I don't mind. When I drive the Model A to work I have to sort of park it in out of the way places. There isn't even curb space up on Vaca, and you can't lock the Model A, so I have to leave it where nobody will steal anything. But you don't want to hear about me. How are you getting along?"

"Fine. Pretty Fine." Roy did not know how to answer her. Seeing Georgia was such a surprise he didn't know what to do.. Her being friendly was even more surprising. How should he re-act to it? Should he back away with a few non-committal words, or should he try to strike up a genuine acquaintance? After all, if he knew the wife, she might lead him to the husband.. But did he want to be around the husband if the wife was always there?

He was sensing another odd feeling--superiority. This poor creature pouring out words in a whisper seemed so pathetic, so out of place. Skinny, fidgety women like her did not usually drive Model-A's. It was hard to imagine her holding down a job.

The lines on her face looked strained and hungry. Her new clothes didn't seem to belong to her. She kept easing her body around to touch the garments as though making sure they were really there. Even in the dark Roy could tell her shade of face powder did not match her complexion. Her face looked as though she had dusted it with a dirty batch of flour. Then her soft, rushed whisper sounded so apologetic. Her effort to keep from waking up the neighborhood was over done. It would have made more sense if she had said a few words and left the way open for a meeting elsewhere and at another time. But she seemed hell-bent on a long chat at curbside in the wee hours.

Instead of taking a course in typing she should have gone to a charm school: Self-confidence, if she could have gotten it there, would have done her more good. What would Hattie say about this drab looking creature who kept clinching her hands, blinking her eyes and who littered her conversation with words like, "uh-huh", "yes", and "you're right"? Common sense told him she and the Grover family belonged to different worlds. It was graciousness against self-torture. An acquaintance with her would never work out. In only a few hours they would discover they must limit their conversation to generalities and the weather. Otherwise, they would be stepping on each other's toes.

At the same time he thought of Larry Thorpe. Larry's smile, his dimples, the way he put his arm around you as though you were the most precious thing in the world. What held him to Georgia? Or maybe the question was, what held Roy to him.

"It must be a long drive in from Pristine," he was saying.

How much more skillfully he lied than she did. Of course he knew she did not live in Pristine. And if she happened to be peeking out the window when he strolled down Peach Tree Lane she knew that he knew. Yet he was able to make this reference to their old home with a perfectly innocent face. He was hoping she would say, "Oh, we don't live there anymore. We live at 2326 Peach Tree Lane. Come out and visit us soon." Perhaps it would take a few more sentences than that to wangle an invitation into their home, but some how he must get this rambling conversation headed in a direction that would do some good.

However, Georgia balked at going in the direction of an invitation. Her reply was quick, but not well done. She had to blink her eyes and pick at a button on her dress. Her glance slipped down toward the pavement. "Yes. Uh-huh. It is a long drive from home." There, she had found a way to neither confirm nor deny that she still lived in a house that was burnt to the ground. "--But I don't mind getting up early. Only lazy people have to sleep late. Yes. It's good for you to have to fall out early. I do like working in the rest home. You get to realize what some people have to go through. A lot of them there will never walk again. A lot more of them are old folks who will never again make it outside those walls. And to think, right out the window you see young healthy university kids walking along the streets. So happy. But I don't want to get morbid. A young fellow like you doesn't want to hear stuff like that. Well, Thanksgiving is right on us. Yes. Uh-huh. I'll say. Doesn't time fly. I'm going to have to work Thanksgiving day. It's going to mean my--uh my husband and

my children will have to eat away from home. I'll say. I'm real glad we've got some friends where he can go and bum a holiday meal. Yes."

The fine points of her conversation were easy to pick out. The reference to people who would never walk again matched with the fact that their spastic child could walk only with difficulty. Her stumbling over the word, "husband", was supposed to make him show signs of discomfort. But he was puzzled why she mentioned having to work Thanksgiving day.

Suddenly she said, "I'll say, I won't keep you any longer. I'm real glad to have met you. You must hear from your sister real often. Tell her I sure do appreciate all the trouble she took teaching a dumb thing like me. Write her that I got a job, and I appreciate everything. Good-bye."

The sky in the east was showing a streak of gray. In a few moments it would be pink. But the streets were still dark as chasms. Mrs. Thorpe hunched her shoulders together and walked over to Vaca. Although she moved briskly she did not have a springy step. It was as though the lost pounds were still dragging her down. Four more blocks and she would be at the Poplars. Quite a distance for a respectable woman to walk on a dark night. However, she was tackling the job bravely. Roy watched her as she reached the area of the blue colored street light and beyond into the shadows.

Back in his room Roy was confused. Was Mrs. Thorpe's story on the level? Was it really an accident that she chose to park by his window? That story about her having to answer the switchboard in the early hours of the morning was barely

plausible in itself. When you added the fact that her book-keeping job also required her to do it on Sunday credibility was being stretched thin indeed.

That part could be easily tested, and in a moment he was tip-toeing his way down the hall to the telephone. The Laudermilchs weren't even stirring yet, so he must be quiet in his dialing. A moment later he was hearing the phone being rung over at the "Poplars". It rang only once, and sure enough a woman's high pitched voice answered in professional tones, "Rest Home". It took only the two words. That was enough to identify Georgia's voice. At least part of what she had said was the truth. Quickly he hung up without saying a word. He did not want her to also recognize his own voice.

Still her story did not seem right. Too many coincidences. All through breakfast he mulled it over, and as he was finishing up the Cream of Wheat an idea struck him. That about her working Thanksgiving. That was the part of the conversation that seemed forced. Why would she bother to tell him about her plans for the holidays?

Why else except to let him know that she would not have her husband tied up next Thursday. That must be it.

Since last August Georgia had been through a lot. By now she must realize that she cannot keep a husband with homosexual tendencies by her side twenty-four hours out of the day. She must have decided to let him stray occasionally, probably with the proviso that he come promptly back to her. Perhaps she was letting him form an "arrangement" with some young fellow like Roy.

Such things were pleasant for him to imagine, and by the end of the day he had let his reasoning go even further. Not only was Georgia trying to tell him Larry would be free, but she was dropping a clue as to where he might be--with "friends". Georgia must know that one of Larry's "friends" was Malcolm Fox. She might be trying to stir up jealousy between Roy and the Fox kid. If she had to let her husband play around it would be to her advantage to inject some acrimony in his play periods. It just might mean that Dolores Fox, together with Vinnie and Malcolm, had invited the ex-bus driver and his children over for Thanksgiving. Anyway it was worth checking into.

Monday morning the Model A was not there. This left Roy lying awake at five in the morning thinking things over. Yes, it would certainly be worthwhile looking into the Fox angle. There would be enough time to run up to Fifty-first Street between his last class today and Mrs. Laudermilch's six-thirty supper. He should have looked up the Foxes long ago. After all Dolores had invited him to do so. At any rate it would not be a good idea to break with Malcolm, borrowings or no borrowings. Too many things indicated he was one of Larry's "friends".

However, at noon his train of reasoning was jolted when he found the mail man had delivered a letter from his mother. The landlady had left it, still sealed, propped up by his ink well.

A surprise. Hattie had failed him. The failure was not a complete one, but a half-way measure that would not get him away from Fort Boomer over the holidays. There was a five dollar bill folded in the inner core of her three page letter.



I've would buy him a few extras but would not get him a round trip fare to Gloriona. Quickly he scanned her letter to see what had gone wrong. Didn't she know that when he wrote he was down to his last cent this was only forty-five points away from the literal?

In her second paragraph the explanation began to come out:

"Well," it read, "it looks like we will get to have Turkey together this year, but I'm afraid it will have to be up in Oklahoma City. I've thought and thought of it, but there just isn't any way I can cook you a decent dinner here. This silly little apartment doesn't have a stove with an oven in it. I've had the worst time patching meals together that are good enough for a person on a diabetes diet. The fourth grade teacher lives next door, and she's been real good to let me use her oven when I have to have something that's baked right. But I can't impose on her to cook a whole holiday meal.

"There's worse news than that. There's no chance at all that we can go out to Luther Blair's. I haven't even heard from that man in over a month. Something's gone wrong out at his house. Last September, when I went back to school teaching, I heard he had hired a new maid. Well, I've found out since then what kind of maid it is. 'Maid' is right. A little split-tail seventeen year old senior here in highschool. She's blabbing it all over town about how Mr. Blair likes her cooking. She's supposed to fix only his supper, but neighbors are saying she's staying a way late at night.

"Anybody can see she's too young for a fifty-five year old man. But the way she twitters about her new 'boss'. you'd

think she'd hooked a crown prince. The other day at noon she drove by the primary school in some car she had picked up, God knows where, and parked out by the play ground and just looked at me. When she could get me to look back she would throw her chin up and laugh at me. Now, that girl can't be a companion for Luther. She can't give him the comfort a man his age needs. I can't believe it will last. I'll just have to sit still and not get nervous until it all blows over.

"That's one of the reasons I've arranged for us to get together up in Oklahoma City. To show I'm not dependent on any one.

"Well, sometimes, Roy, I get so blue. This diabetes is hard to control. I've had some extra doctor bills and will have to go back for a check up after Thanksgiving. He's warned me not to get off my diet during the holidays.

"I'm going to have to cut the money part a little short. This five dollars is all I can spare. It should almost pay for a ticket up to Oklahoma City. When you get there we'll scrape up enough money some way to get you back. I don't know just how much the fare will be from Fort Boomer, but surely you've got a little bit left from last summer's savings.

"Now then, I've heard from Hollis and Rena. Hollis, you know, is a captain in the army. But he's not a regular drill type of soldier, he's got some sort of special assignment. He thinks he's got a way figured out to get promoted to a Major. That's really something, because he's only been in service a few month's time. But, he says, if he gets his promotion he'll have to take a transfer away from Oklahoma City. He might even

have to sweat out a long stretch in a little hick town a way off some where. I hear he's had to sign up for three years. Well, poor Rena will just have to adjust. I certainly hate to see both my daughters follow their husbands off to the ends of the earth. So, I sure wanted to see her. She might not be close to home much longer. So, we've made it up for both you and I to eat Thanksgiving dinner with them in Oklahoma City.

"I'll catch the bus right after my last class Wednesday. It will get me at Rena's by nine o'clock that night. Now, If you could maybe cut a few classes Wednesday, maybe you could roll in about the same time. But I don't want you to get into any trouble with your professors. The four of us will have a big time. Hollis is always so polite and nice to me.

"I must keep up my spirits and not start feeling sorry for myself. Nobody can stand a woman with a hang dog look on her face. It will be good to get away from Gloriona and get a fresh outlook on life---"

By this point in the letter Roy's heart had sunk. Thursday was only three days off. No time to write her that he couldn't possibly eke out a bus ticket all the way to Oklahoma City. No time to tell her he wouldn't think of touching Hollis for the money to get back--that's what he would have to do if he ran up there without a return ticket. Just barely time to write Rena and warn her he wouldn't be able to make it.

For a little he would place a collect telephone call to Gloriona and thrash out a better arrangement with his mother. But, if he remembered Hattie's letters correctly she had not installed a phone in her "silly" little apartment. Nothing

could induce Roy to place a collect call to Rena's. She would accept it, but she would know the exact questions to ask to find out what had happened to last summer's pile.

No. Now was the time to show his independence.. If he did not show up for the holidays they would be as put out as he, himself. His mother should have thought of that when she short changed him. No, he must write two calm letters, one to Rena "regretting" he couldn't make it, the other addressed to his mother at Gloriona. The mail service was such that she would not get it until her return from Oklahoma City next Sunday night. In it he must outline to her the problems of making ends meet at a university. Shame on his mother. She should have warned him of these changes in plan long ago.

However, by afternoon he was beginning to be apprehensive about the coming weekend. For one thing the whole town would be deserted of students. What would he do for amusement? Yes, he wrote and posted his two calm letters, but after his last afternoon class he walked briskly up to Fifty-first Street. His visit to the Foxes must be quick if he was to get back to Mrs. Laudermilch's in time for the evening meal.

Roy had often thought about the kind of house Malcolm's aunts must live in. Their talk about "estates" and cultural splurges in Europe must fit in with their frequent statements of being broke. So in his mind he pictured the two of them holding on to a mansion like house with all the ginger bread and widow's walks popular at the turn of the century. Perhaps they still managed to keep the outside well painted, but there would be a least one floor blocked off that they never used. Probably in its heyday the grand old house had sat alone on

a whole block of ornate gardens. By now it must be sold off except for a willow tree or two whose boughs must droop over a painted picket fence into the yard of a dinky little modern cottage.

But something like that was not what he found. Fifty-first street was well passed the university district with its conglomeration of odd styled boarding houses. Their street was within a newish neighborhood developed about five years ago when some heirs sold off their property on a hill. Fifty-first was still on the lower rise area, and you must climb up three or four blocks to get to the good views. Nevertheless, the houses which nestled like hen's eggs at the foot of the hill, had been built with an eye for prestige. Each house had at least one bay window. Coach lights were on either side of the front doors. All windows had shutters, and those in the living room were broad picture styled things with twelve panes.

The main sacrifice as far as luxury was concerned was the reduction in space. Up on the hill the view homes spread over hundred foot lots. On Fifty-first they were whacked down to mere sixty foot frontage. They were built when yard fences were just going out of style. The contractors had settled on a compromise and fenced in the back yards using widely spaced stays that gave no privacy at all. The front yards were left to melt into one another. Only by noticing the patterns used in mowing the grass could you tell where boundary lines lay. It gave the small lots a deceptively spacious feeling. However many a bay window with its twelve paneled sashes opened on to a similar bay window mirrored only twenty feet away on the side of the neighbor's unfenced house.

The owners managed privacy with venetian blinds. All houses had them. All were lowered to the bottom sill and most were kept tilted at unrevealing angles.

It was surprising how many of the houses were painted white with matching silver or grayish silver roofs and shutters. Green and white had gone out of style. In other parts of town you often saw white walls and brown roofs. But usually such a trim looked too homey and cute for real elegance. In this area the right combination of paint, like the fenceless front lawns, suggested exclusiveness without extra expense.

No, there was nothing in the least run-down about the two sister's external appearances. If their house matched the rest of their style of living they had not withdrawn from the world.

Vinnie and Dolores had a doorbell. As Roy stepped on to the red brick terrace to ring it he heard muffled sounds of conversation coming from the back of the house. It sounded like two women laughing over afternoon cups of coffee. However the hour was approaching five o'clock. If someone was having a coffee break instead of preparing the evening meal then they must have rather careless eating habits. Relaxed laughter at this time of day didn't quite fit in with the neighborhood. Across the street, for example, an executive type in a gray flannel suit was just nosing his new Dodge into the garage. His face was set in faint lines of weariness. For him this was that blacked-out period at the end of a day in the office.

Roy couldn't be sure, but he thought the laughter at the back of the Fox house had died down. They must have heard the

bell. In a moment they should be admitting him. But several moments passed, and no one had opened the door. Slightly annoyed he rang again. Somebody must have tilted one of the slats in the venetian blinds by now. They must have seen it was only Roy Grover, a college student. The door should be opening. He pranced impatiently. The executive across the street had closed his garage door and disappeared inside his little sixty foot castle. Roy rang the bell a third time.

About a half a minute later Vinnie Dollop answered. She peered at him as though she had trouble focusing her eyes and said, "Yes?"

Her appearance surprised Roy. He had never seen her except when she was away from home and supposedly dressed up. Always she had looked horrible, stockings with warped seams, slapdash make-up, clashing colors. That wasn't the way she looked here in her home. Her simple print house dress was spotlessly clean and seemed to match her flower-like complexion just right. With all make-up off her features were quite pretty. Her hair, slicked back in a bun, made her seem sensible. If only her eyes didn't glint like steel drills you would say she was a sweet old lady.

"I'm Roy Grover. Don't you remember me?"

She merely said, "Yes?" again.

"--At the La Fiesta. Also out at River Terrace. And-and over at Tolliver's by the Deaf Institute. You must remember me," said Roy. "Your sister invited me to look you up some time."

She cleared her throat and said, "What do you want?"

Roy became more out-of-sorts. When you look someone up, you expect to be invited in. Obviously that's what you want.

Well, if she was going to act that way about it he would get down to business right here on the front door terrace where all the neighbors could hear.

"I'd like to speak to Malcolm," he said. "During the fall I've made several loans to him. About fifteen dollars all told."

"What do you mean?" said Vinnie.

"I mean I'd like to have it back. Thanksgiving is only three days off, and it so happens I don't have quite enough cash for a ticket home. I'm sorry to ask you, but I need to have the money back very badly."

She rubbed her upper teeth against her lower lip and said, "I guess you can come in."

Roy was surprised to see how small the living room was. For one thing there was no separate entry hall. Once inside the front door you were right in with the sofas and grand piano.. Another thing, part of the limited living room wall space was taken up with two other doors. They were closed so you had no idea what the rest of the house might be like. The bay window with its many sashes and panes took up a great deal more wall space, and the sisters had been forced to use it for unconventional purposes. They had pushed part of the grand piano in it. And it was with the sight of the piano that he began to see traces of a past life of grandeur that he had expected to see on the outside of the house. That huge musical instrument didn't belong in this mass-produced real estate tract. The thing must have been seventeen or eighteen feet long. Even with the small end backed into the bay window it still took up so much room



you felt like you had entered a storage closet for a musician. Just behind the big mahogany bench was a little Duncan Phyfe sofa, its blue striped upholstery was streaked from a past leak, and on one end was actually patched. It was in such a crowded spot Roy had difficulty squeezing past the solid mahogany bench and sitting down. Once seated he saw another little sofa, styled from some French period, over on the other side of the piano. A huge gilt-framed mirror hung above it. The piano and the mirror dwarfed everything else in the room. Yes, once settled, you could look around more closely and find some book cases loaded with a lot of sheet music and what-nots, and on the floor was a thread-bare oriental carpet. The room felt chilly, and after a moment he saw why. There was a built-in fireplace in the room, but the treble end of the piano bulged out until it almost touched the fireplace screen. Of course, they couldn't dare light a fire in the grate. Heavens knows how much furniture it would blister.

At first Roy thought Mrs. Dollop was going to sit in the French sofa so they would have to shout at each other over the closed top of the piano which was decorated with a brightly colored fringed shawl. But she brought forward a little red velvet chair and sat close to him.

"So," she said, "Malcolm has been borrowing money from you?" The tone of her voice did not suggest she was going to doubt his word, rather she seemed interested to find out this minor scandal. She squinted her eyes, pursed her lips and listened eagerly as Roy outlined the occasion and amount of each loan. She questioned him shrewdly for details, and as he piled on more and more corroborative descriptions she began nodding her

head affirmatively.

When he was through explaining she said, "Well." Then she cleared her throat and added. "I'm glad you've told me all this rigamarole. I'll certainly pass it all on to Dolores. Thank you for coming by."

"But what about the money? when do I get it?" said Roy.

"Little boy, we don't happen to have a cent in the whole house. So that's that. I don't know what you're going to do about your little bus ticket home to your mama. Maybe you'll have to tough it out here in Fort Boomer. You might even have to open a can of pork and beans for your holiday meal. I don't know when Malcolm can pay you back. You sure can't get anything out of us."

"Mrs. Dollop," said Roy. "It isn't fair to treat someone like this." He sounded as indignant as he possibly could, but he didn't know how he could make the moral condemnation really strong. All he could do was repeat. "It's not fair. It's not honorable."

"I don't think you've been away from home long," said Vinnie. "It's been about two and a half months since your school started, hasn't it? I suppose you really want to see your mama. But you've got to grow up sometime, and it looks like this is going to be a good lesson for you. Maybe you'll learn not to make loans."

Roy was not going to be dismissed so easily. "I'm going to have to be insistant. I'll have to go to the dean and tell him about this."

"Go on."

"Well, where is Malcolm? Is he here? I want to tell him

myself that I need the money."

"He doesn't live here."

"Doesn't live here? Why last summer you snatched him back like you were going to lock him in this place and throw away the key." Roy had dropped all sense of politeness.

Vinnie replied unruffled. "Malcolm's gone back to rooming with that feller Tolliver. He hasn't lived here for a month. You should have found out where his home was before you made a loan. I always tell them, if you want to borrow money go to a bank. If your credit's good with me it'll be good with a bank, I'm sure. Did you make Malcolm sign any papers? Did you so much as have a witness?"

"Mrs. Dellop," he said, "you know you don't make little loans to friends like that."

She threw up her hands and said, "What do you mean 'you'? That's the way I make loans. And you'd better start making them that way if you want to eat Thanksgiving."

"Could I speak to your sister, Mrs. Fox?" he said tensely.

"Go ahead," she said without budging an inch in her chair.

"Then call her in so I can start speaking. I heard her laughing in the back part of the house while you kept me waiting on the door step."

"Oh, you want me to find her for you? I'm sorry, I didn't make the loan. I'm not having anything to do with it. If you think it'll do any good to speak to Dolores, you find her."

Roy got up from the sofa and said, "Very well. I will. I'll try this door first."

Vinnie was out of her chair in an instant. "Sit down.

I'll call her. You think you're so smart."

She literally pushed him back in the sofa then adroitly sailed through one of the side doors. It took her only an instant to open and close the thing, and she was careful to ease herself through sideways so almost nothing of the beyond would be revealed. However, she had made one mistake. When she pushed Roy back on the sofa she so startled him that he wasn't watching her scoot through the door. He was looking, open-mouthed, straight ahead and at that big, gilt-framed mirror. He caught a glimpse of a narrow, dark hall, a lighted area at the end, filtered shadows coming through a venetian blind, and in front of the blind a woman's overly styled pink hat, black hair, and a white face. Cigarette smoke was curling up passed the white face. But, unmistakably, the woman was Beulah Astor.

Instantly, Roy knew he had been let in on a secret. All the scattered clues were now arranged in place. That tinkling laughter he heard was coming from Dolores and Beulah. Dolores and Beulah were dykes. They had known each other before, maybe as lovers, and were now re-united to pick up wherever they had left off.

And Vinnie, what was she? That old persimmon couldn't be a dyke. No, whatever love she had known had been straight, and she was now left to watch helplessly while her sister carried on illicit loves. All she could do was sit in an adjoining room while the laughter tinkled -- sit and smolder. Well, well, Vinnie had told him he must grow up. So here was another slice of life for him to look at. Dolores, of course, would have guessed that he was queer, but something told him that would

not make her sympathetic to his cause. Shared secrets usually fared worse than unshared ones.

He had quite a little time to think all this over, because it was several minutes before the door opened and Dolores came in.

Mrs. Fox also looked relaxed, but in an entirely different way from her sister. If an unmistakable work dress had made Vinnie look human it was an indefinite, unidentifiable costume which made Dolores look her most radiant. Her dress was silk, a flowered pattern, something like lilacs and pale roses on egg-shell white. It certainly was not long enough to be an evening gown, yet it was too frilly for street wear.. Neither was the mass of lace around the neck which stretched almost over to the puffed sleeves on her shoulders entirely correct for a cocktail gown. It was a dream dress, something an actress would be photographed in to show off the allure of her personality. Her hair was softly curled and hung down to the pearl choker around her beautiful neck. She smiled as she extended her soft hand to Roy. Dolores sat right beside him on the Duncan Phyfe and even extended her arm along the carved back so that her fingers almost touched his far shoulder. If only there were a huge bouquet of roses, preferably in a translucent white vase, rising up from the little stand at the end of the sofa she would be in a perfect setting.

"I'm so sorry we didn't answer the door bell sooner," she said. "But some little boys in the neighborhood have been playing the naughty game of door bell ringing. We thought they had struck again. Now, let me hear all about this money Malcolm has borrowed from you."

She listened patiently as Roy retold the details of each loan he had made. Toward the end Dolores looked distressed and said, "You don't have to say more. I believe you. It's obvious you're telling the truth. I've been worrying about Malcolm lately. I feel even more guilty than Vinnie does because it was I who insisted that he go back to living over at Holliver's. It looks like you can blame me for all of this. But I'm very much afraid Vinnie has told you the bare truth. We don't have a cent in the house. There's no way we can keep you out at all. I only hope your landlady will be able to serve you meals during the holidays. If not, I'm afraid you're going to have to scrape the bottom of the barrel to get something to eat. You're sure you can't phone home to one of your relatives and get them to wire you some emergency money?"

Roy said truthfully that he hadn't yet spoken to Mrs. Laudermilch about eating with her through Thanksgiving. But he was afraid she would object. And, no. He could not waste a telephone call to any of his relatives.

"Then," said Dolores, "why don't you, right tomorrow, go to the dean of men and tell him your whole problem. If you have to bring Malcolm into it, go ahead and do so. If Malcolm has been getting out of hand he deserves being told on. He had promised everybody to straighten up and lead a sensible, mature life. You say you are working. Have you really pressed your boss for an advance? Surely he won't object to giving you a little sum when you've already earned it."

Her soothing suggestions made it sound as though he didn't have a problem at all, that if he would only go to the right

places he would find a way out of his predicament. In fact she changed the subject and began asking him how he was doing in school. "I hear you're doing fine in the drama department. I can remember the first time I appeared on stage. A little five year old girl. Singing a song about my mother. A whole spot light just for me. It got me hooked, and I've never gotten over it."

Roy's being broke had completely faded out of her mind. She even brought up the subject of renting him the room behind the garage. "If you're having a tussle with your landlady you can always move out with us. I know it's a little far to walk to the university, but the bus fare is in the cheapest zone. We only charge ten dollars a month, really a rock bottom price when you consider you've got your own bath and private entrance. Of course we have a gas heater installed, and we certainly won't take it out. Since you're here, would you like to see it?"

Roy said, no, he would not, and tried to get back to the subject of the loan. He pointed out that he could beg the dean for help, and he could ask his boss for an advance. But the first thing he should do was to try to get back money that was passed due.

"I certainly understand how you feel," she said. "Why don't you run over to Tolliver's apartment? You might catch him home tonight. You can tell him I'm ashamed of him."

Roy tried to act huffy, but it was hard to do so around Dolores. He said, yes, he would go to Tolliver's at once.

She said, "There's a little package that came through the mail for Malcolm. If you're going to run over there, why not take it to him? Will it put you to any trouble?"

Roy could think of no reason to say, no. In fact, when you talked to Dolores there seemed no reason to have the word, no, in the English language.

When he left her house he had to rush home, by foot since he could not risk his few pennies on a bus fare, to meet Mrs. Laudermilch's tight supper schedule. While he was eating the beef stew he began to see that none of Mrs. Fox's suggestions were any good. For several reasons he did not trust Dean Rugger. Mr. Richards was so smooth tongued that if Roy touched him for a loan he would probably end up agreeing to work an enormous number of extra hours for a fifty-cent hand-out. When somebody else must pay your way they can see no reason why you should have any spare change at all.

"Mrs. Laudermilch," he said, "some of my plans have been bailed up. I might have to stay in Fort Boomer during the holidays. Are you going to be serving meals?"

Amy and Lola kept eating their stew with a regular rhythm. Mrs. Laudermilch kept rocking in her chair. "It will be five dollars extra," she said.

Roy could not help gasping. As soon as he had finished reading his mother's letter he had locked it in his suitcase and kept the key in his wallet. But some how this old woman knew he had exactly five dollars extra in his pocket. As she continued rocking in the chair she went on to explain that this price would not include the Thanksgiving meal itself. "The girls and I are going to eat out with some friends. Thursday I'll chust serve breakfast in the morning and some soup at night."

As soon as he was back in his room he checked the suitcase. Yes, it was locked. The letter was still inside, but it wasn't



nestled in the center of the lining pocket, but pushed slightly over to the left hand side. He looked at the cheap little key he had in his wallet. That old woman must be handy with a hair-pin. Wasn't there any place in his room that she couldn't seek out and ransack?

He hated to have to break into his seventy cents to ride the bus out to the deaf insitute. But that was at least five miles from the university, entirely too far to walk this Monday night. And now that he had set his mind on collecting this debt he was determined to carry it through. He had already written the calm letters to his mother and sister rebuking them for not furnishing him fare home, but it would be a triumphant surprise if he could manage his own ticket and appear in Oklahoma City by his own resources. He must bend every effort to bring this about.

The fare was fifteen cents to Tolliver's which meant another fifteen cents back. It turned out to be thirty cents wasted. Neither the name "tolliver" nor "Fox" was on any of the rows of mail boxes. When Roy went up to the apartment he had visited last summer he found an entirely new face answering the door. A young woman with a baby in one arm opened the door a crack with the other. Behind her he could see her youngish husband pecking away on a typewriter. The shelves with the records and the vases were completely gone, and the walls were decorated with cheaply framed photogrpahs of a baby.

"No, those boys don't live here any more," the woman said. "Someone's always coming around asking for them. No, I don't know where they've moved to. A month ago we got a new landlady and everything. A whole lot of people moved out. A lot of

switching around. I suppose you could go to the University and find out where they live. I think they were students. I'm sorry."

As he rode back on the bus he fumbled the little package he had so gallantly promised Dolores he would deliver to her distant nephew. It was indeed small, about the size of a pound of butter, but weighed much less. Perhaps it had really come through the mail as Dolores said, but before she brought it out to Roy she had slipped it inside a small paper sack and stapled the top shut with a double row of wire brads. Through the sack he could feel twine string tied around a cardboard box. Other than that he had no idea what he was carrying. He had a mind to rip the sack and drop the package, which he supposed was addressed to Malcolm, in the nearest mail box. But that was being petty. He must control his anger. When he got home he locked the package in his suitcase. He would deliver it if and when he traced Malcolm to his lair. Little matter if Mrs. Laudermilch broke it open.

It was close to bed time. Lola was talking to a boy friend on the telephone. In the bathroom he could hear Amy turning the hot water tap in the lavatory off and on. Probably she was putting her hair up in curlers before going to bed. He peeked out into the hall to see if Lola's hair was already up in curlers. It was, which meant the household would be closing down for the night as soon as she was off the phone. Her conversation was mostly giggles, but occasionally she would say something like, "I can't stand Bette Davis. She's mean. But I think the Andrews Sisters is cute." Finally, Mrs. Laudermilch called from her bedroom behind the kitchen, "Lola. Lola. Hang that thing up."

As soon as Lola was off the line Roy darted out to the phone and dialed Mr. Richard's home. The hour was five after ten. It took several rings to get an answer, and Mrs. Richard's voice sounded sleepy when her "hello" finally came over the line.

"Could you tell Mr. Richards I've got a doctor's appointment in the morning. I'll be late to work. I'll try to make it by nine, maybe a little before, but I'm likely to be an hour late."

"What's the matter with you?" she asked.

"My stomach," he said quickly and hung up.

At once he went to bed. Amy was through fiddling around in the bathroom, and the house became quiet. He was drifting off to sleep when he heard the telephone ring. The bedroom door behind the kitchen creaked on its hinges. The landlady's heavy tread sounded on the hall floor. Roy, still fighting sleep, heard her mumble a grumpy, "Hello. Who did you say? Oh, him." Her heavy tread advanced to Roy's door, and she knocked. "Some man wants you on the phone."

Roy was afraid it was Mr. Richards. As he slipped on trousers and shoes he realized his plan to press collecting the debt would probably have to be put off until Wednesday. He could not afford to make his boss too suspicious. If his employer demanded to know the exact nature of his illness he would be sunk. He could not explain that he was vomiting, for example, while the landlady was listening. She would know he was lying.

"Hello," he said cautiously.

There was no answer. No, he was not holding a dead ro-

ceiver. The Bell telephone's electrical system was humming efficiently. Once he thought he heard someone breathing. Again he said, "Hello." No reply at all. "Hello. Hello," he called in a puzzled voice. Nothing but the mechanical hum. Strange. For a full minute he waited. Finally, it was clear he was the victim of some sort of prank. He hung up.

Next morning he entered the Performing Arts Building at twenty to eight and went up to the third floor where he knew Marion Tolliver would be going to his early morning class in Advanced Directing. The halls were deserted at so early an hour. It was five minutes before even a janitor showed up and another two minutes before one of the professors walked by. She was Miss Sorenson, his instructor in Speech and Movement for the Stage going to her Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday class in Intermediate Acting. He liked Miss Sorenson. In addition to being kind she walked with movements that were dignified, even majestic. "You're out early, Mr. Grover," she said. Too bad it had to be her who noticed he was out of time and place.

He suspected Tolliver came to all classes early. Marion was the kind to be overly correct in everything he did. It would not do to let him slip all the way into his classroom before Roy could buttonhole him. That would mean he would have to tell all about the loan within earshot of six or seven other students. It would be as embarrassing to Roy as to Tolliver. He must catch him in the hall before he went in.

There he was coming out of the elevator. Tolliver was dressed in a leather, finger-tip length coat. It would be very rich looking except the collar was made of a heavy fur more

appropriate for Minnesota than Texas. Yet, it established him as being from some where else, not of the local breed. Other things set him apart from the common herd. The pipe he smoked had a tiny little bowl carved in an ultra modern shape. The stem was about an inch longer than the usual ones. Between the folds of his ample coat collar you could catch a glimpse of a blue polka dot bow tie. Below the leather coat were perfectly pressed beige gabardine trousers. He wore burnished leather Chukka boots.

There was no trace of a mince in his walk. His stride down the hall was as firm and impressive as that of a judge going to his bench. His pipe and chin were tilted up, and his eyes were focused on some distant nothing. Roy had to catch him by the elbow to get him to notice he was in the hall.

"Dear me," said Marion. "Oh, it's you. Nice to see you again. Good morning."

Roy, of course, did not let him go by. "Where is Malcolm? I've got to find him. I'm going to be stuck in Fort Boomer the whole four day holiday if I don't. He owes me fifteen dollars. I've simply got to collect it. Last night I was out at your old apartment. They told me you two had moved out. You've got to tell me where I can get ahold of him today."

"Dear me," said Tolliver. "Malcolm hasn't roomed with me since we moved away from the area of the Deaf Institute. He went back to his Aunt. It's--uh--let me think. Some where on Fifty-first. They're in the phone book. I'm making do with a little room over in the graduate men's co-op. Crowded with all my collection. Feel free to drop in on me any time you

like. I'm sorry to hear Malcolm's been borrowing money. I thought he had straightened out his life. You have my sympathies, but I'm afraid I can't give you any more help than that. How are you getting along in your dramatic classes?"

Next morning he was surprised and annoyed to find Mrs. Richards at the printing shop. He had seen her a couple of times before when she had dropped her household chores to bring some little item to Mr. Richards. This morning she was dressed in navy blue slacks and a man's work shirt, obviously here for more than an errand. Not only did she have the mimeograph machines uncovered ready for Roy to pitch in, but she had one of them started and was running it herself. She pressed starter buttons, adjusted levers and caught papers without the slightest trace of feminine incompetence. Her touch was so expert she was clearly showing Roy how the job should be run.

It wasn't only her pace-setting tactics that annoyed him. It looked like she was going to throw a monkey wrench in his plans to touch Mr. Richards for an advance. He even suspected she had showed up today to thwart that very move. Until mid-morning she had him working at a break-neck pace. It wasn't until eleven o'clock that he had a chance to tell Mr. Richards that he was stranded in Fort Boomer unless he could rake up about ten dollars for a bus fare home.

Mrs. Richards darted out of the wash room just as he was dropping the hint for a ten dollar advance. While busily soaping the ink off her fingers she spoke right up. "Oh, how keen. You'll get to work for us," she said. "Dick and I are going to hit it all day Thursday just like it was any other day. We'll throw together some turkey sandwiches and cranberry

jam and have the holiday trimmings right here in the shop. There's no reason why you can't put in the whole four day week-end right here with us."

"But I won't get to go home." Roy was almost wailing.

She seemed not to understand. "Where else can you make money over a holiday?" She didn't bring up the fact that he wouldn't get the wages until well into December.

Roy tried a little white lie to bring things around his way. "Mrs. Laudermilch says she'll charge me five dollars extra just for meals those four days. No Thanksgiving dinner thrown in. Where will I get the five dollars?" He did not mention that his mother had already sent it to him.

"Can't this Mrs. Clabbermilk wait until you get paid? It's just until the eleventh. Tell you what I'll do. I'll call her up and expelin the whole thing, that you're working extra and there's no question at all that you'll have the money just as soon as pay day comes. What's her phone number?" She advanced toward the telephone.

Roy began stuttering out objections fast. It wouldn't do for her to contact his landlady. A couple of sentences and she would know he already had the five dollars. Mrs. Richards kept dogging him. "What's wrong with calling your landlady? You want a loan. I can fix it up for you. I know all about landladies. You sound like you're afraid of her. Well, I'm not. What's her number?"

Only one thing would stop her from calling his house-- his unconditional promise to work the whole four day week-end. He promised he would find his own way to settle things with his landlady.

Wednesday. Each of his early morning classes had a sprinkling of absentees. Everybody was asking each other how and when they were going home. Herle was going to fly. Olive was entraining for Houston at two-fifteen. Toward noon the absenteeism was quite noticeable. When the tower chimed rang high noon the crowds that usually swarmed to the campus eating places were reduced to scurrying remnants, cut by half. Many of the restaurants across from the campus were closing their doors. The ones left open only had a sprinkling of patrons. At one o'clock Roy saw a janitor crossing the lawn to the flag pole in front of the administration. Although it was hours til sunset he was taking Old Glory down.. It seemed even the flag-raiser was off for the long holidays.

By two o'clock time was dragging badly. What could he do? He jingled the forty-one cents left in his pocket. The Texas movie house was two blocks away from the campus. It was the oldest and cheapest movie in town. If you ducked in before five o'clock it only cost twenty cents. Almost half of his capital. He rubbed the coins together. Why not?

Better think it over. Check a mystery story out of the popular reading room. That would cost him nothing, and a fascinating Earle Stanley Gardener might kill time as well as a third run movie.

The popular reading room was closed. The periodical reading room was closed. Only the main hall and the reference sections were staffed with skeleton crews of librarians. He ambled across the campus and kicked the turf with his shoes. It looked like it would be the Texas theater.

Two doors this side of the Texas a new cafe had opened



its door last Friday. Yesterday they had hung their little shingle-sized sign from the roof of the covered walk-way--"Bernice's Club." The word "club" was causing consternation amongst the students. Did they mean you were going to have to "join" before you could get in? But clearly that wasn't it, because in only a few days their clientele had soared. Fort Boomer had recently gone "wet", and this was one of the new beer joints, and the only one within walking distance of the campus.

Apparently Bernice and her husband were the daring sort. Either that or they knew the right connections. As soon as the city had voted in liquor the University announced that the "rule" forbidding the sale of alcohol within a mile of the University would be enforced.

What rule, many asked. No one had ever heard of the rule, and how did it get passed when liquor couldn't be sold within sixty miles of the place? There was also an indefinite state law about minors could not buy liquor. Texans usually did not pay much attention to such blue stocking regulations. Bernice was certainly defying any and all rules.

Her club used to be a men's clothing store which went broke and stayed vacant for three years. When she set up business she just moved in some booths without so much as repainting the floor or walls. So now you could see the unpainted sections where the shelves for shirts and pants used to line the walls, and next to them the areas that had been left open and plastered with various coats of grey, green or subdued pink. Besides booths she had installed a counter and a back bar mirror. The mirror was already decorated with neon signs advertising Pabst and Schlitz. The lettering bubbled with what looked like amber

liquid. Every booth seemed full. This was the one spot in town that was crowded.

Roy paused and looked inside. Beer. He had never drunk any. He had never been in a place that sold it. How much did it cost?

He stuck his head through the doorway and looked. A big man and a little woman were behind the long counter. Both were so busy opening beer bottles they didn't even have time to notice that someone was hesitating in the doorway. He should not go in.

But maybe he could buy a bottle and take it home. That way he could sample it carefully in his own room, and if he made a fool of himself there would be nothing but four blank walls to see it.

He stepped slowly inside and hung around the cash register until the little woman had time to come and ask him what he wanted. "How much is it?" he asked.

"How much is what?" she said. She had a high squeaky voice, and Roy could see she was on the down-hill side of middle age. When Roy told her he might want to take a bottle of beer home she said, "Our size of bottles is ten cents." A more daring customer was signalling her from the first booth. He was holding up five fingers, and she was about to rush over to satisfy his desires.

Roy did not know why he blurted out what he did. "I'll take four," he said. "It's supposed to be cold, isn't it?"

"Certainly ours are cold," she said. In a moment she brought him a sack with four cold bottles in it and took his forty cents. When he paid his five dollars to Mrs. Lauder Milch

he would have a penny left.

He did not know what the terrors of drink might hold for him. So he must make sure he didn't burn any bridges behind him. As soon as he slipped into his room he hunted up the landlady and handed over the five dollars. Her comment was, "I thought you'd be staying over."

There. His food supply was now secure. He couldn't go off his head and blow his eats money. It was now safe to sample the beer.

How did one open a beer bottle? A screw driver might do it, but he didn't have one. It was impossible to ask the landlady for a suitable tool. His fountain pen was far too flimsy. It wouldn't do to jerk the cap against the edge of his writing table. Far too noisy, and it would ruin the wood work. The only possible implement he could find in his whole room was the latch which held the window screen in place. It meant screwing it out. If he didn't get it back exactly right Mrs. Tauderzich would notice it. Nothing would arouse her suspicions so much as a loose window screen latch.

Yes, the latch did the trick. Probably, by the time he opened the fourth bottle he would find the knack was easy. He only hoped a wind didn't stir up and bang the loose screen around while he was consuming his four bottles. He didn't know how long it took to get through this big a supply. Perhaps it would be mid-night before he could get the latch screwed back in its rightful place.

As soon as the cap was off the beer foamed. Quickly he licked it off and was surprised at the bitter taste. Was this

stuff going to be worth forty cents? Slowly he began sipping it. With perseverance he got through half a bottle and noticed the first signs of giddiness.

He must find out how soured he was. Calmly he arose from his chair and looked around the room. Why nothing was really spinning. Could he walk? He took two steps and found he could with no problem at all. He had read that policemen drew a straight chalk line on the pavement and tested suspected drunk drivers by making them walk it. He had no chalk, and it would be ridiculously messy if he did. It was easy to see where the flooring was joined. The planks made a pattern of innumerable straight lines all over his floor. He set out to walk one of them. It was easy. He even whirled around on one foot and strode back in the opposite direction.

He had also heard that another police trick was to make you pick coins up off the street. He had one penny left, enough to take that exam too. He flipped it. It rolled under the bed. He bent down--easily--and crawled under after it.

He flipped the penny again. This time it rolled under his study table and stopped under the little jet where the gas heater had once been plugged in. It reminded him that the room was cold. Very cold. And before he stooped to pick up his money he put on a sweater. It wasn't enough. He donned his neckerchief on top of it. All the extra clothing made him a little clumsy as he reached down to get the penny. But he was satisfied that the beer was hardly affecting him at all. He was beginning to suspect the stuff was over-rated.

Calmly he sat in his chair and sipped the beer. He

was sipping out the last drops in the bottle when he heard the dining room door open. Could it be supper time already? It was. He was pleased to find he could walk into the dining room with complete composure. He sat down with true dignity.

He and Mrs. Laudermilch were by themselves. "The girls have dates," she explained. She, herself, had eaten her meal at some other time. Her only purpose in remaining in the dining room was to properly carry out the duties of a hostess. For some reason she felt he should not be left to eat alone, so there she was in her rocker, picking at the ruffle on her apron. She seemed not to notice a thing unusual about his appearance.

After his beef stew and thin slice of raisin pie he went back to his room and opened the second of his four bottles. It was now barely cool. When these things warmed up how would he ever get them cold again? The idea of asking the landlady to chill them in her refrigerator was laughable. He would be thrown out on the sidewalk in five seconds. He began to feel slightly triumphant at putting over a drinking spree on his landlady.

But he must think about this problem of warm beer. He had heard that nothing tasted worse than beer left to get hot. To tell the truth he could think of nothing tasting worse than beer when it was cold. He lifted up his second bottle and toasted it to the walls of his room. "You are quite disappointing. Yes. Quite."

He now began drinking the second bottle. His dollar alarm clock seemed to be ticking louder than usual, and he

noticed the hands pointed to six-thirty-two. Time was passing tolerably fast. The trick was to not think about the number of minutes and seconds in the four days that lay ahead of him. In fact he had only a short amount of time to kill before his mother would be phoning him. Let's see. Her bus would get into Oklahoma City at nine. Rena would meet her. His mother would immediately ask when Roy would be coming in. His sister, since she would be the only one who had had time to receive his calm letter, would tell her, "He's not coming."

Hattie would fly into a fit. Probably she would demand to call Roy by long distance right there at the bus station. In any case it would only be another thirty minutes before they drove home where she could place the call from Rena's house. Nine-thirty at the latest he would be hearing from his relatives.

He got into his third bottle by eight o'clock. The liquid was now quite warm. In fact the whole room was warm. He got up to pull off both the mackinaw and the sweater. When he arose from his chair he discovered that by this time the room was really and truly reeling. But somehow he didn't care. Let it reel. What he must do was quit worrying about the room and analyze his feelings. By now what did he think of beer? That was easy. Beer in any form was awful. The warm was no worse by a jot than the chilled. He could not remember getting into anything that was as over-rated as beer. Phew. The ads boosting the stuff were downright liars. To be more exact there was nothing to it but a little bitter taste. Why did people make such a fuss about a bottle of beer? Phew. It had done little more than make him light-headed. Perhaps it made him

want to float. That could be taken care of. All he need do is stretch out on the bed. So he kicked off his shoes, reclined on his narrow, cot-like bed and let his arms dangle over either side. Delicious. Gravity seemed suspended. But beyond a doubt the taste of beer was over-rated.

What was this crazy impulse to sing? Singing would be idiotic. He would not do it. He had better control of himself than that. Mrs. Laudermilch would heave him out in five seconds. He must relax and be composed for the nine o'clock phone call. It would be catastrophic if either his mother or Rena should guess he had been drinking.

Maybe he had better get up and try the floor walking test. It took several minutes for him to decide whether he should bother to go through that again or not. But when he did get up and walk the plank he found he could still do it easily, including whirl to go forward and backward. However, it was all so needless. So he crawled back on his bed and delivered himself to that floating feeling.

He had finished his fourth and last bottle when he noticed it was nine o'clock. Ah, no time to lose. He must get off the bed and prepare for the phone call. It would be coming through any minute. He arose and immediately advanced toward the bathroom to wash his face. How idiotic. He opened the closet door instead. When he finally got to the right door he found it took two passes to catch the knob. In the bathroom he lost no time in crossing over to snap the latch shut that led to the girls bedroom. Trouble finding the latch. Perhaps he was slightly drunker than he thought. He knew you always took a

cold shower to sober up. So, leisurely he began undressing himself. With no more than his shirt off he changed his mind. He must remember that it was already nine o'clock. It would not do to be caught clumsily bathing himself when the phone rang. Face washing would be enough. He whirled around to turn on the faucet in the little lavatory. A hideous looking face appeared in the mirror above it. Aghast, he realized it was his own. Those half open eyelids, the bloated, contorted cheeks could only be his own. Oh, God. He was drunk.

Rapidly he began washing his countenance. The soap slipped from his hand and ricocheted across the floor... Time was too short to bother with the lengthy chore of picking it up. Over and over he splashed cold water on his face and rubbed and rubbed it with a towel. Cautiously he took another peek at his face in the mirror. It was still catastrophic, and the phone would be ringing any second.

He must rush to put on suitable clothes. It wouldn't do to appear in Mrs. Lauder Milch's hall in his undershirt. He should dress in his best suit. Sunday clothes would help disguise the wild looking eyes. But wait, he must unlatch the door to the girls room, pick up the soap and throw his shirt back on his own room.

Soap can be the contrariest stuff when you are in a hurry. His problems didn't end with the bar of Lux. When he finally got to his clothes closet the coathangers simply leaped from the cross bar of their own accord and shot like bows and arrows across his room. What a tedious job it was getting into his suit. To look his best he should not forget the tie. But could he get one knotted correctly?



It seemed he could not. While fretting with it one of the empty beer bottles tipped over fell off the table with a terrible bang and rolled across the floor.

Ohh. Mrs. Laudermilch would be coming in to investigate any moment. He got the one bottle picked up but knocked two others off in the process. Both rolled under the bed. There was nothing to do but try to crawl under the bed, Sunday clothes and all, and get them out. Mrs. Laudermilch would never put up with empty beer bottles under the bed. He stooped, he crawled, he choked on mattress lint, he slithered on his belly before he could get both of those swaying cylinders back on the table.

His suit was covered with dust. And the phone light ring any second. Why hadn't Mrs. Laudermilch done a better job of sweeping his room? The rest of her house was as polished as a bald head. He hadn't realized she had been so lax with his own living quarters. He must speak to her about it. Right after the phone call would be a good time.

But now he must brush those wretched patterns of cobwebs from his best suit. What time was it? It must be ten or fifteen minutes after nine.

Something must have happened to his clock because its hands pointed to ten-thirty. He shook the thing. It seemed to be running alright. He stood dead still in the middle of his room and listened. Surely there must be some sound from the outside world that would give him a clue as to what the time of day really was.

The house seemed quiet. No noise came from the streets. Even the distant hum of traffic which you could usually hear

over on busy Tace Street was absent. He tip-toed to his door and peered out in the hall. It was dark. No line of light showed under either Mrs. Lauder Milch's nor her daughters' rooms. Enough light filtered through the front door flashing to dimly outline the telephone sitting like some embryonic form from a fantasy world there on its little hall table. It was completely silent.

He got no telephone call that night. He got none Thanksgiving day. He got none the whole four days of vacation, all of which he spent working long hours at the printing shop.

As it turned out his mother was so unmoved by their missing each other over the holidays that she didn't even bother to sit down and write him a letter when she got back to Glorious Sunday night. Her son's absence meant so little to her that she didn't find time to write him for another five days. It was the last Friday in November before she got a letter off to him. It was delivered in Fort Boomer in the noon mail, Monday, December the first.

Roy jumped up from the dining table as soon as he heard the postman's steps on the porch. He snatched it out of the mail box before it had rested there a half second, rushed into his room and tore it open.

There were the usual three pages written back and front. As he unfolded them he spotted enough words to see that the letter must contain nothing more than conventional news, something about, "--sorry that--" and "--because that little split is still--" To point in reading that. Nestled inside the inner most sheet was a piece of folding money doubled up into a smallish quadrangle.

With nervous fingers he unfolded it. Alas. It was not the usual five dollar bill. Only a one.

Roy was near a state of panic. For twelve days he had been without a cent of spending money. (His penny had gone for a ball of gum at the end of Thanksgiving day.) For more than a week he had been dreaming of the little nerve-soothing splurges he would make as soon as his mother's five came--movie tickets, sundaes, perhaps another bottle of beer. This one dollar was hardly enough to dispell the feeling of being flat broke.

Without even bothering to read her letter closely he acted. Jerking paper and envelope from his desk he began a long letter to his father, the first he had written him since the beginning of the school term. Why shouldn't he write him? After all, Hattie, herself, was constantly needling him to touch Ted for his college expenses. Well, if his mother was going to desert him like this he would not hesitate another moment to switch his loyalties to another camp. From now on he would, indeed, write his father regularly and faithfully. And from now on out he would space his letters to Hattie so irregularly that she would certainly notice that a change had come over him.

On the first two pages he scrawled out all the news he could think of, how well he was doing in his classes, (this was true) how much he had grown up and matured since highschool graduation, (also true) and how he was soberly settling down and looking toward the future (roughly true).

On the last page, which was closely written back and front, he spelled out his need for help. He described how for the last two weeks he hadn't even enough money to buy a three cent

stamp to write him, how he was working but his employer had not paid him a dime, (no need to mention the one twenty-five cent advance) and how the boss was such a close-fisted sort there was no hope of getting anything out of him until the monthly pay-day, December eleventh. On December ninth his room and board bill was due. His landlady was a domineering old grouch who had already taken the heater out of his room and daily dropped hints that she must raise the rent. He desperately needed help.

Yes, the dollar bill his mother had sent was put to immediate use. He rushed to the nearest branch post office and changed it to buy a stamp. The letter to his father was in the mail within thirty minutes of his getting the one dollar and his mother's disappointing chatter about the fickle Mr. Blair.

With great restraint he didn't go near Bernice's Club. When the big crisis broke loose on Wednesday he still had seventy-two cents left. If he had not saved the better part of his mother's little gift he would have been in bad shape.

The crisis Wednesday was a result of a two day build-up. After Roy had mailed the letter to Grass Prairie he was so distraught he had a hard time getting through the afternoon classes. When the last one was over he stopped in at the men's gymnasium and took a hot shower to make him feel more relaxed. He was still glowing from it when he got home to Mrs. Lauder-milch's supper. She had prepared chicken and dumplings and had steamed up the whole house doing it. The heat and steam made Roy feel drowsy after the meal, and he brushed his teeth and lay down for a nap before going to the library to study.

He was awakened about seven o'clock. A ruckus was going on either in the girl's bedroom or the bathroom. Maybe it was taking place in both places. He heard the bathroom door that opened to the girl's bedroom bang open and shut several times. Someone was too worked up to stay put in one place. The little medicine cabinet door over the lavatory also slammed to and fro.

It was Amy and her mother. Amy was having hysterics. "I won't touch it much less brush my teeth with it," the daughter screamed while slamming doors. "You got to make him pay for it, Mama. He's in his room now pretending to be asleep. He knows what he's done. Go tell him. If you don't, I will."

Roy could hear the landlady's mumbled reply, perhaps trying to cool her daughter off, perhaps trying to egg her on. Doors banged to and fro several more times, and once more Amy's voice rose to a screech. If a deaf man a block away had been asleep she would have awakened him. Roy rose up on his bed with one elbow and listened. He realized his chance of snoozing was over.

"Ruined it," Amy was splitting her tonsils. "No telling what he's had his mouth on. I wouldn't brush my shoes with it. I'm telling you I won't touch it. Go make him pay for it."

The landlady muttered some more. Roy thought he heard her say, "Shut up. He's just another sissy."

The word "sissy" infuriated Roy. Immediately he got up from his bed and prepared for battle. It was enough that he must stay in a cold room. Enough that he must take skimpy meals apart from the two daughters. Being called a sissy a few feet from his own room was the final straw. If they were going to

stage a row for his benefit he would give them back as good as they were lending.

He marched down the hall and knocked on the girl's door. Instantly things quieted down. Now it was whispers lowered to the level of hisses as they realized the confrontation was here. Again Roy knocked and called out Mrs. Laudermilch's name.

"What do you want," she said.

"I was trying to sleep. Could you be a little quieter."

Amy shrieked. "There he is. Right at our door. Go tell him, or I'll tell him myself."

"Shut up," he heard his landlady say. "I know how to handle this."

She handled it very much as her daughter had been urging her to do. When she opened the door to Roy she had a newish looking red tooth brush in her right hand and was rubbing the tip of the end bristle with her thumb. "You used Amy's tooth brush," she said. "Feel of it. It's still wet. You chust help yourself to Amy's nice new one. You got an old bum one, and you thought you would sneak in and use Amy's for nothing. Amy won't stand for it. You go buy her a new one."

Roy drew himself up tall and denied it indignantly. "I absolutely couldn't have. I keep my tooth brush on the lower shelf of that little medicine cabinet. That's the one I used. I don't know where Amy keeps hers, but if this belongs to her and if it is wet then she got it that way herself. I'm positive I used my own."

Mrs. Laudermilch took her left hand from behind her apron and held out a some what frayed tooth brush, also with

a red handle. Roy gasped as he recognized it as his own. He started to grab for it, but Mrs. Laudermilch held it with a firm grip and said, "Don't take it. Just feel of it. Dry as a bone. Amy's is wet. She hasn't brushed her teeth. You're the one always so finicky about brushing teeth. It's worse even now. When she went to look for her tooth brush on the top shelf it wasn't there. It wasn't easy to find. You hid it on the lower shelf behind you can of teeth powder. That's stealing. You buy her a new one or I call Dean Rugger."

Roy was nonplussed, and when he was finally able to speak he ripped out an inappropriate word. "Amy is an old bitch. She does nothing but fight with Lola and keep me awake. I don't remember anything about the toothbrush. I couldn't have used it."

"Well, feel of it. You got it wet." It was surprising the mother didn't react to the word "bitch". Maybe she didn't know what it meant. Any way, Roy figured it was time to watch his language. If he got too bold the dean might agree with her, and no telling what would happen.

"I said I don't think I used it. If I did it was an accident. I haven't got any diseases, and my mouth hasn't been on anything but your food, what little there is of it."

"Hama, don't back down. Make him pay for it," Amy yelled.

Again Roy's temper went up. He spoke to the daughter directly. "I'm tired of your tantrum. I'm going to the library where I can study in quiet. Good night."

As he marched back to his room to gather up his books he heard the girl's bathroom door slam with a wall-shaking bang

and Amy's shrill wail coming through both it and Roy's own door. "You've let him get away with it. I won't stand it."

Roy could do very little studying at the library. Most of the time he fingered his ninety-seven cents. One thing was certain he was not going to blow fifteen cents of it for a toothbrush. Stabs from his conscience also bothered him. Perhaps in his sleepy mood he really had reached for the wrong brush. But that was no reason for Amy to go wild over it. All she had to do was boil it in the tea kettle if she was afraid of getting his germs. If only he had enough money he would move out of that German woman's squirrel cage right tonight. Oh, how he hoped his dad would come through with a check. If a glorious check did appear in next Monday's mail he would move out within five minutes of cashing it. At the first opportunity he must start looking for another room. Certainly by Sunday night he must have one picked out. He must also have all his things packed so he could walk right out of Mrs. Laudermilch's trap the minute he had the funds to do so.

At ten o'clock the library closed, and a few minutes later he found himself standing on Mrs. Laudermilch's porch rattling the front door. The thing was locked. Strange, she had never closed up for the night before eleven. No matter. As part of the rental agreement the landlady had given him a front door key. He always kept it in the coin compartment of his wallet. He remembered seeing it there when he got the ninety-seven cents change today at noon.

But it wasn't there now. There on the dark porch he had to empty out all of his change and turn the wallet inside out.



The key simply wasn't there. How could he have lost it between now and twelve-thirty? The thought of waking Mrs. Laudermilch up after their row and admitting he had lost his key was most unpleasant.

Was there any other way to get in his room? The window that overlooked his study table was right here at the end of the front porch.

He remembered something. The night of his drunk he had unscrewed the screen latch to use as a bottle opener. Did he put it back in its hole? He knew he had been careful to get rid of the bottles and other traces of his pre-Thanksgiving debauchery, but he couldn't remember re-inserting the hook.

He tip-toed to his window and touched the screen. Although it looked as though it were solidly fastened it wasn't. The one touch and it swung out a half inch. The window sash was also quite easy to lift up from the outside. The only problem was crawling over his desk there in his dark room without knocking anything down. But by carefully avoiding his dictionary, his text books and his bottle of ink he got into his own room while hardly making a sound. Once he had the light flipped on he looked around for the latch. He must devise a way to cover up his means of entry and yet leave it accessible. He found the latch dropped on the floor a few inches from the unused gas spigot. By enlarging the hole on the screen frame with his finger nail file he was able to slip the latch screw back in the wood and still leave it completely loose. There. Let the old lady lock the door all she pleased. He had a means of getting in and out.

Next morning's breakfast did not go smoothly. It was reduced to a bowl of oatmeal and a hard boiled egg. She had even removed the cruets of vinegar and salad dressing from the dining table supposedly in fear he would dip into those. Amy and Lola had both eaten in the kitchen before he was admitted to the table. Mrs. Laudermilch sullenly watched him from her rocking chair.

At noon he had left over chicken backs and sauerkraut. All Tuesday afternoon he thought the situation over. It was true Mrs. Laudermilch had contracted to serve him meals, but there was nothing in the agreement about their quality. If things kept on she would stick out a glass of water and a slice of corn bread and call that a meal. Maybe he had better buy Amy that toothbrush. So he stopped in at Woolworth's and found a red one that looked exactly like the one with the wet bristles. This left him with eighty two cents.

At supper time he presented it to the old woman with an apology. It surprised her. She looked guiltily from the new toothbrush to the dining table. His supper was only dumplings and sausage. However she quickly regained her composure and sat in her chair and silently rocked. Roy could not tell whether he had smoothed things over or not.

That night when he got home from the library the front door was again locked, and again he slipped in through the window. As he slid across his study table to the floor he heard whisperings in the bathroom.

Wednesday's breakfast was sausage and eggs, the two cruets were back on the table, and she even offered him a cup of coffee.

But the noon meal Wednesday was reduced back to a meager bowl of chili and boiled turnip greens. She sat silently in her chair while he ate it, but when he rose to go she challenged him. "How did you get in last night?"

"Why, with my front door key," he said.

"Let's see your key. You say you got through the door with a key. Let's see it."

Roy was forced into a show of artificial indignation. Did she dare doubt his word? She did. "I don't believe you got a key," she stated flatly. "You've lost it. A new one costs fifty cents. Show me the key or pay me fifty cents."

"Mrs. Laudermilch, I bought your daughter a toothbrush. I did that as a gesture of good will. I have apologized for something I don't remember doing. I have bent over backwards to keep from having an argument. But you seem to be such a contentious person it is impossible to be amicable with you. If you insist on having an argument we might as well have it and be done with it. You demand to see my key. I demand you bring the heater back in my room. I also demand you serve meals above a starvation level. You once threatened to turn me into the dean of men. I'm now telling you to heat my room and improve the food or I'll go see him myself."

"Go ahead," she said.

"I shall. I shall also tell him you have read my mail. I can't even keep letters in my suitcase without your picking the lock and breaking into them."

"That's a lie. I don't read nepotty's mail. Now, you show me your key or pay fifty cents."

Roy huffed his breath so it flew up past his nose and marched back to his room. Immediately he picked up his books and walked to his afternoon classes. It meant he arrived on the campus thirty minutes before the first one started.

"I'm going to have a beer. I'll spend every dime I've got getting drunk rather than give that woman fifty cents." However he limited his drinking to one ten cent bottle and dutifully went on to his class.

It was when he got home for supper Wednesday night that the real storm broke. It was only five-thirty in the afternoon. The sun was still well up in the sky. Yet he found the front door locked.

Uh-oh. It was going to be tricky crawling in through the unlatched screen in broad daylight. He tip-toed to the window and pushed the frame. It would not budge. He was frantically tugging at it when the front door flew open, and Mrs. Lauder-milch said, "I caught you at it. You lose your key, then you ruin the latch. You crawl in through the window. That's housebreaking. So, I don't give you any supper. I don't give you any more meals at all. When your rent is due on the ninth you move out. If you want to stay that long. Chust remember you're a thief and a housebreaker, so no more meals."

And she slammed the front door shut.

Roy had to pound on it and plead with her to let him inside. As soon as he got into the hall he started his rebuttal.

"You contracted to serve meals. You're going to serve them."

"What you mean 'contract'? I didn't sign any contract."

She gave a harsh laugh, wheeled around, her apron flying out like a ballet dancer's tutu, and marched back to her kitchen.

Roy followed quickly, but the door was already locked by the time he got there and tried to turn the knob. He pounded on the panelling and demanded she open up. She didn't. He tried the dining room door. It was locked. The girl's room was also locked. Nothing in the house was accessible but his own room and the bath.

This was a terrible development. How could he buy enough meals in a restaurant or even canned goods in a grocery store with seventy-two cents to last until next Monday? What if his dad didn't reply by return mail? What if he could get ahold of nothing until Richards paid him on the eleventh?

Nonsense. Surely the college officials would help him in a case like this. Even if Dean Rugger was suspicious of him he would have to find a way to keep a student in good standing from going hungry.

But it would be in the morning before the dean's office would open. He was hungry now. On top of that tonight Hedda Gabler opened for its four day run, and by seven o'clock he must be at the auditorium ready to work the lights. From seven until ten-thirty when the play was over he would have to watch other back stage crew members sipping cokes and munching on chocolate bars. No, he had better try to placate Mrs. Lauder-milch if he could.

So he went back down the hall to the kitchen door, called the landlady's name sweetly and slipped a fifty cent piece under the kitchen door. "Mrs. Laudermilch, I apologize. Here's

money for the key. I happen to have to work at the University tonight, a very important assignment. Could you serve me tonight's supper, and we can get things straightened out tomorrow? I'm sure we can clear up this mis-understanding--"

Roy thought he heard someone snigger in the girl's room. Definitely he heard a faint scraping sound between the bottom of the door and the sill. He glanced down and saw that the landlady had taken the fifty cents. Roy waited. Surely she would be opening the door. He waited some more. Nothing happened. He called her again. He knocked, he pleaded, he tried to reason, but he got no response whatever.

At first he wanted to break into a rage for wasting the fifty-cents, but the situation was too serious to use up energy on anger. Instead he must congratulate himself that he still had two dimes and two pennies. Tomorrow he would beg the dean, Mr. Richards, even the police for help. And tonight he had enough money to buy a hamburger and a candy bar. No, he had better leave off the candy. He would need the five cents to purchase some sort of eating matter tomorrow morning for breakfast. And some how he must get through tonight's performance of Hedda Gabler without messing up the lights.

When you are broke time drags by so slowly. Instead of seven o'clock he was at the auditorium by six-thirty. As he walked up the mosaic steps to the spacious back stage area he tried to convince himself that the hamburger without onions that he had just eaten had filled him up as completely as a bowl of dumplings. Mrs. Laudermilch wouldn't have given him more than that even if she had been serving. As he buckled

his belt on the tightest hole he tried not to notice that his trousers still rode at the lowest level on his hips. In only a few days he would be flush with money. He would be moved to a new place and could stuff until he popped. He would go to Fort Boomer's most expensive restaurant. He had heard that The Plantation served a smorgasbord still dinner, all you could eat for two dollars. Next week he would go there every day. Tonight he must forget about his slack belt.

The University's famous auditorium was as elaborate backstage as it was out front. The tilted stage was deep, floored in hardwood parquetry and stretched laterally to provide ample wing space. On the north side ladies' dressing rooms arose to three tiers. They were matched equally by men's dressing rooms on the south. The lighting equipment was also up-to-date and elaborate. Its control panel, where Roy would have to work, was reached by a long, iron grille cat-walk that circled, mezzanine fashion, around all of stage-right.

Since Roy was arriving early he was afraid he would be the only one there, but he was not. Olive, the head of his lighting crew, was already up on the cat-walk checking the switches. She was dressed in what a rich girl must consider working clothes. She wore powder blue ducking slacks, a knit striped jersey and smoked beige deck shoes. She looked like she had just stepped off a yacht.

"Roy," she said. "Do me a favor. Before anyone important shows up. Scoot across to Vaca and bring me back a double chocolate malt. I've been here since five and haven't eaten anything but two cough drops since noon. I'm starved."

A malt. Roy didn't have enough money for a malt, and Olive didn't seem to be aware of the cost of things. She had just told him to buy it and was not holding out a handful of change. He was forced to drop a hint.

"Er--how much is a double malt?" he said.

For a moment she was surprised at this question. Then light, plus a pitting look, dawned on her face. "Ch. Pardon me. I should have two dimes in my purse. Its that beige bundle below the master switch. God knows what else you'll find in there."

Her "bundle" was very well loaded, and squeezed in toward the bottom he found a fat coin purse. Besides change there was a wad of bills. Even if they were all ones she must be toting ten dollars.

What a temptation to stick one of those extra coins in his pocket. No, he would not stoop to that.

By the time he got back with the malt a sprinkling of cast and crew members had arrived. A boy who worked on props came in eating a pickle. It caused considerable twittering and razzing. Jokingly, he let on like a pickle snack was the most ordinary thing in the world. "You want one?" he said to everybody. "I've got a jar of them out in my car." All but Roy let on like a bare, unadorned pickle would be the last thing they could eat. Roy said nothing.

Inez, a plump girl who was playing Berta, walked in just as Tolliver and Dr. McKay arrived. Inez was sipping root beer from a paper cup. When she saw Dr. McKay she giggled guiltily and said, "Have I really got to throw it away?"



Dr. McKay was a tall, extraordinarily handsome fellow who taught scene design. The girls all but fought to get into his classes although Roy suspected he wasn't much of a teacher. His sets were catchy and brightly colored, but it was hard to follow his plans when you tried to make them.

He was stage manager for Hedda Gabler. The head of the department must have assigned him the job. Certainly Beulah Astor didn't pick him out. She couldn't stand him. But it was his duty to arrive early and get the show going.

It was a hard and fast rule in the drama department that no one could eat backstage. Especially taboo were paper cups of soft drinks sipped through straws. In a tense moment of some plot the whole effect might be ruined by the sound of a sucked straw floating from back stage to the audience. Mr. McKay, however, was no match for a pretty girl like Inez. "Just be sure it's out of sight before Beulah gets here," was all he said.

Roy wondered if Marion Tolliver had hidden behind some bush until he saw McKay drive up then bounced out with correct timing so he could walk in with him. Tolliver was so eager to be associated with the high-ups. He would do anything to distinguish himself from ordinary crowds.

McKay, however, seemed to be eager to get rid of him. Soon he began flirting with the girls and left Marion to buzz around by himself. Tolliver quickly found a way to assert himself. If the stage manager wouldn't chastise Inez, he would. "Good God," he said to her. "Any professional trooper will tell you never to eat before a performance. I know where-of I speak.

I've had experience here and there myself, and I've chatted with plenty of veterans of the board. Never eat before a performance."

Beulah did not arrive until fifteen minutes before curtain time. As director there was no need for her to stoop to the menial routine of getting a show going. All she need do was get there in time to check things out and deliver a pep talk.

She was in a hurry. Beulah never did anything slowly. She came sailing backstage dressed in an open work black velvet lace dress worn on top of a sea foam green satin foundation slip. The outfit looked like it came straight from Paris. Her pale green hat was equally striking. It soared like a mass of convoluted sails about to take off in the breeze. It only reminded Roy that the air backstage was getting fetid. It made his stomach feel queazy.

Beulah clapped her hands and called, "Cast on Stage."

Everyone trooped out of the dressing rooms. Miss Sorenson also appeared backstage at this point to give her pupils from her Speech and Movement of the Stage class her special good luck gesture. Before every performance she would spit on her index finger then touch the left shoulder of each actor. "Good luck," she would wisper. As the cast milled toward stage center she began her spitting and touching. Beulah seemed a little disgusted.

By this time all the cast looked like nineteenth century Norwegians. Tolliver, who was playing Eilert Lovborg, was especially handsome in a rust colored velvet dinner jacket. A gold watch chain stretched across his chest. He took a stance

a stance a few feet from the others and began softly humming an aria from Manon. He hummed it just loudly enough for the others to register the fact he was singing in French.

Merle, the girl who was Beulah's favorite in the History of the Theater class, was playing Hedda. Oblivious of Tolliver she walked back and forth with her eyes closed and her hands raised to touch lightly on her temples. Her chin was tilted up, and she looked like an Indian holy man about to achieve nirvana.. She was "concentrating". She, too, had heard how dedicated actors got ahead. During that lull between the time they were made up and when they made their stage entrance they did not flit frivolously about backstage. Nor did they hum tunes from operas. They concentrated, and she was grabbing every spare moment to void her mind of the trivial and get in character.

Beulah clapped her hands and began speaking. "Spots. Spots," she said. Her cigarette bobbed up and down between her lips as she spoke. "Spots come through. Kids, sometimes you're beautiful. Terrific. Little moments. But, damn it, there are still parts where you're just a bunch of crap. Now, tonight I want you to live it. Be the character. Live it all the way through, not just in spots. I know you'll do it. Once the house lights are down and you hear the whir of the curtain going up, once that magic hush goes over the audience--all those people out there waiting, expecting--you'll get it. It'll hit you. You'll know this is The Theater." She took the cigarette out of her mouth, held her arms out as though embracing the whole world and said, "Damn. I love you all."

Clive scrutinized the performance closely from the cat-walk.

Twice she whispered comments to Roy. "Concentration my eye. She's copying Bette Davis. Look at her wave her hands around." Later on she criticized Tolliver. "He's just emoting. No characterization comes through."

As the second act was about to finish she leaned away from her light switches for a moment and whispered in Roy's ear. "I'm still hungry. I need something solid. Do you think Beulah will be backstage during the intermission?"

Roy said he couldn't guess whether she'd make it back or not. "I'll bet she's sitting out front with someone special. She won't make it back until curtain calls. If you hurry you can scoot across the street to the Pig Sty and pick me up a package of Fritos. It's ten minutes until the third act starts. Please, Roy."

This time she opened her purse herself to deliver the correct change. But she had to keep one hand on the dimmer switch as she plowed through her heap of miscellanea. Opening the coin purse with one hand proved tricky. She got out a dime for the Fritos alright, but she dropped a quarter on the iron slatting. . It made an awful tinkle..

Both of them gasped. Did they hear it out front? Roy, also with hand on a switch, careened his body downward to try and pick up the coin... He only succeeded in pushing the quarter through the grille work. It landed fifteen feet below on the parquetry and began rolling around in a wide circle.

Would it wobble around and spin out on stage? Both Olive and Roy held their breaths. Finally, it tottered over toward the proscenium arch and flopped still in a little coil of rope,

the tail end of a line tying down a flat. "Oh, thank God," said Clive.

Roy, however, kept his eye on that quarter. The well-dressed Clive didn't seem to be very worried about it. The curtain was going down. She only seemed to be interested in choosing the right moment for him to duck out. The curtain hit the parquetry. The house burst into applause. The cast broke their pose and began racing toward their dressing rooms. The prop crew rushed on stage to change the arrangement of some vases and books. No one seemed to notice the quarter.

When Roy got back with the package of Fritos he let his eye slide to the coil of rope. It had been kicked around and he couldn't tell if the quarter was still there. Clive, hiding at the extreme end of the cat-walk began eating the little pieces of spiced-up corn.chips. "You want one?" she asked Roy. He did. She fed him three as she expressed her eternal gratitude for saving her from "starvation." The spicy chips made Roy's stomach growl embarrassingly. It kept rumbling and groaning through out the rest of the performance.

Tolliver got special applause at his last exit. Merle made her voice ring with great feeling as she delivered her last line before shooting herself. A prop man fired a cap pistol for the shot. The curtain was down. Wild hand-clapping, but according to drama department rules the curtain calls were limited to two.

Roy flipped the last switch. His plan was to immediately saunter down to the rope coil and casually stand there until he had a chance to pick up the quarter. But Clive had to shake

his hand in congratulations for a job well done. She also had to make some additional criticisms on the performance. She ended by saying, "But I don't want to be picky. They were all nice."

Beulah was backstage delivering her, "Thank you, Thank you," speech. Again her cigarette bobbed between her lips. "Beautiful. Beautiful. Solid beauty, all the way through."

Roy was descending the cat-walk ready to rush over to the quarter when Tolliver broke away from the huddled cast and Beulah's congratulatory praise to signal Roy. Grover, of course, didn't want to talk to him, but Tolliver wouldn't let him go.

"How was it?" he asked. "Did I come through? Could you see me up there on the lights? What I wanted to ask was, did you get in touch with Malcolm before he left for Mexico?"

"Mexico?" Roy was surprised. "But I thought he was going to school."

"Oh, he withdrew. He had some little problems. Maybe I ought not to tell you. Yes, I'm sure I shouldn't repeat gossip. No, I can't tell you. But he's down in Mexico City staying with someone working for a silver mine. He's taking the cure. There, I shouldn't have told you. Sorry. It slipped out."

"Cure? What cure? What's he got?" asked Roy.

"I shouldn't have told you. He hasn't got anything. He's just hooked on smack."

"What's smack?"

"I can't tell you." Tolliver backed away gushing phrases of regret for letting the un-repeatably slip out.

Roy didn't bother to think of it. He must get to the pile of rope. Oh horrors. The crew members were already

striking the set for the last act, and the rope was completely gone. Forgetting caution he went over to examine the floor where the coin used to be. For yards around there was nothing but polished oak floor. Someone asked him what he had lost. He must have had money on his mind because he answered, "My wallet."

"I see something bulging out in your left hip pocket. Seems exactly like a wallet."

Angrily, Roy straightened up from looking. The set changers jostled him to one side. He had to dodge to keep away from a suspended window box of paper geraniums. It was no use. The coin was gone along with his chance of eating a decent breakfast.

Another strict drama department rule forbade "visitors" hanging around backstage after a show. This was a stricture from the dean of women's office, one designed to eliminate stage-door Johnnies. That dean had even ordered a uniformed night watchmen to hang around between the stage entrance and the near-by magnolia grove. She didn't want any swains picking up actresses just as they left the auditorium.

The night watchman was on duty only a few feet from the loading ramp, but in doors Mr. McKay had let things get slack. Three healthy looking boys had surrounded Inez a few feet from the slideable loading door. "Gee, how do you keep from getting goosepimples in front of all those people?" one was asking. Inez's giggled reply echoed dangerously loud. If Beulah should hear there would be hell to pay.

Roy wanted to get away from here. The cool night air would feel much better against his face than the stagnant pollutions backstage. With a brisk pace he left the auditorium, and after a few strides he was passed the magnolia grove. He heard a mature, masculine voice behind him say, "Hey, Buddy, you don't happen to know where Vic's hamburger joint is do you?"

Roy turned around. This was a hell of a time of the night for someone to ask directions. He was slightly surprised to see that this question, worded in such colloquial phrases, came from a dignified looking gentleman dressed in a nice suit. Here in the semi-darkness he looked about fifty years old. Now he was beginning to show a trace of paunch around the middle, but in his youth he must have been quite the athlete, perhaps a football player. Today he must have arrived at some sort of executive position. He carried himself with an air of dignity and assurance. But he was momentarily mollifying the assurance with a relaxed pose. He moved one of his feet in a slightly nervous gesture. His hands were in his pockets, and his right one was twiddling with something, maybe a latch key.

Roy was confused. About four blocks up on Vaca street there was a little diner called, "Bill's Hamburger Joint". But he had never heard of a "Vic's".

"Don't you mean Bill's?" Roy asked.

"Aw," he said, "I know where Bill's is at. Naw, that's not it. I was supposed to meet a fellow right after this here play let out. He said it was just off the campus, across from this here fancy pile of brick. Well, thanks any how. I don't want to hold you up from anything."



He set out in an easy saunter a few steps ahead of Roy. But unless he struck across the freshly watered lawn there was no path leading away from Groves. The sidewalk led only to the traffic light on Vaca Street. So in a few paces they were both at the stop light. It happened to turn red as they got there.

The man was still twiddling with something in his right pocket. He rocked on his heels a time or two and whistled a little tune between his teeth. In a moment he said, "It's a nice night, isn't it?"

There was nothing for Roy to do but agree. "Pretty nice," he said.

"You didn't just come out of that auditorium, did you?" the man asked.

"Yes," said Roy.

"I didn't notice you out in the lobby. You must have been one of the kids back stage."

"I was on lights," said Roy.

"Lights. Now isn't that something. Lights." He supposed they must be very hard to work.

By the time the traffic light had turned green Roy guessed what was coming off. He was now standing beside a stage-door-Johnny. Only this Johnny wasn't looking for one of the Dean of Women's girls, he was looking for a boy.

Roy also realized he was terribly hungry. Would sponging off a stage-door-Johnny be worse than begging Dean Rugger to help him get a meal tomorrow? Roy didn't know if it would be worse or not, but it might be much more successful. And it

could lead to eats tonight instead of some late hour tomorrow morning.

It did. The gentleman happened to have a brand new Buick only a block away, and he did not want to fool with any U-district eateries. "I've heard this Plantation is pretty good. I'm from out of town myself. You'll have to show me the sights of Fort Boomer. How does this here Plantation sound to you?"

He also introduced himself. He was John. "You drive," he insisted when they got to the Buick. "I'll bet a young fellow like you is good at it." At the Plantation he steered Roy into a booth that had a private curtain. A very pretty waitress dressed in a can-can costume brought menus for them. John did not let himself get interested in the waitress but extended his foot under the table until it touched Roy's ankle.

"Hell, this thing's in French," he said. "Can you read that stuff?" Roy had to admit he couldn't. "Well, hells/bells," he said, "what's wrong with both of us ordering a man-sized T-bone steak?"

Roy saw nothing wrong with it.

"Would you like some of that smorgasbord too? We could get some of that down while that frilly little girl is cooking us a steak. How does smorgasbord sound to you?"

Nothing John said sounded bad including his suggestion that they go up to his room in the Palace hotel for a drink.

Roy couldn't help but be self-conscious as he passed under the chandeliers in the Palace's lobby. If this were the movies a hotel dick would appear from behind a column, and

pushing words out of the side of his mouth, would say, "Oh no you don't. Not in a high class joint like this." But no flick appeared, and Roy was left to admire the confident way John got his room key from the desk clerk, calmly asked for the evening paper and bought two packages of chewing gum. While they were waiting at the marble plated entrances to the elevators he tossed one to Roy and told him, "I always chomp on some Dentino after a meal. Habit more than anything else. Love a wad."

As soon as they were inside his large room he giggled and tousled Roy's hair. "Let's just sit here on the edge of the bed awhile," he suggested. "Unless you want to get into that bottle of Bourbon right off."

Roy also giggled and said, "I've never tasted Bourbon."

"To hell you haven't?" said John. For a moment he sat there leering into Roy's eyes, then said, "Now you got me guessing. Do you know what the score is or not? Are you a green virgin, or are you stringing me along? Am I supposed to show you what Bourbon tastes like, or am I supposed to show you something else?"

"Something else," said Roy.

John turned out to be fairly good at making love. He was certainly attentive enough, but after thirty minutes Roy saw that he had underestimated the man's age. John was probably closer to sixty than fifty. But he made up for it by versatility. He wanted to try everything--try it on the bed, on the floor, in the shower. He ended up by challenging Roy to a contest, not of sex, but plain old push-ups.

"I'll bet I can chin myself ten times then do fifty

push-ups without stopping. Can a young buck like you beat that?"

Immediately he caught the top of the bathroom door facing and did ten smooth chins. Hardly stopping to catch his breath he dropped down to the floor and ran off fifty push-ups. By that time his face was red and he was panting, but he still had plenty of wind to say, "Okay, Hot Stuff, let's see you match it."

By grunting and groaning Roy chinned himself twice and did ten push-ups. John slapped him on the rear end and said, "I beat you on that part, didn't I? I can't believe a smart boy like you has never tested Bourbon. Let's wade into that bottle."

He flipped his suitcase open and rummaged through a carelessly stacked pile of loud shirts and produced a small sized bottle. As yet it did not have the seal broken. But John soon broke it and poured out deep slugs in two of the hotel's drinking glasses. He locked arms with Roy, winked and said, "Let's down the first one like this."

Roy coughed on the first swallow. Certainly it was stronger than beer. John laughed and slapped him on the back. "I just sort of knew you were going to cough," he said. "Come on now. You really didn't get choked on it, did you? Hell, you're a good-looking young blade. You've been around. I can tell. You've tested liquor before."

Roy explained that he had tried beer, but even with that his first taste had been just before Thanksgiving.

John poured some more liquor. "Roy, let's quit pussy-footing around. You know how to pick up stuff off the street."

You know what to do with it after you get it in bed. I'll bet you've tried something fancier than liquor. Come on, Roy. How much stuff have you tried?"

Roy was getting a little muddle headed and resolved then and there to drink no more of the Bourbon. But he still continued his half blaze, half innocent line. "What is fancier than liquor?" he said. John laughed, slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Let's take another hot shower."

After the shower he suggested they both stretch out on the bed and talk. "How old do you think I am, Roy? Come on, guess. I think you're about--no, you're not that far along--you're about seventeen. Guessed it, didn't I? Okay, you guess my age. I'll bet you a dime you can't come within two years of it."

Roy was a bit flabbergasted. For one thing, the ten cent bet showed a surprising stingy streak in his host's nature. The big spender who had shot the works at The Plantation was now speaking of dimes. Some how that didn't sound good. For another thing, if he lost Roy would have to admit he didn't have a dime. He decided to bet any way.

"Fifty-eight," he said.

"Damn, you hit it right on the nose. Go over to my suitcase and look in that plastic do-jigger in my front pants pocket. Pick yourself out a dime."

Roy got into the wrong front pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. John immediately said, "Haw, that ain't it. That red plastic thing in the left pocket. That's it. You find a dime in there?"

The red plastic thing had exactly one dime in it. Roy made a show of openly dropping the coin in his palm to prove he wasn't taking more than his share.

John had another idea. "How many push-ups can you do?"

"Push-ups?" asked Roy.

"Yeah, push-ups. A hot young thing like you ought to be able to beat an old codger like me. Count them off for me."

And stark naked John tossed off seventy push-ups on the Palace's deep pile carpet without wavering on a single one. After the seventieth he bounced up, panted a little bit and challenged Roy to go one better.

Roy said he couldn't, and John asked, "Why not? You haven't been living it up, have you?" And Roy, in an attempt to prove he was not debauched, managed to pump his way through a dozen.

John said that was better than he expected. "Do you know how to box? Come on, let's see you throw one at me." He dropped into a boxer's stance, began bobbing and weaving, and the first thing Roy knew a big solid fist jarred his chin.

John laughed. "I pulled that one short," he said. "I could a floored you. I could teach you to throw them and stop them if I was going to be in town long enough. Anybody ever tried to teach you to box?"

When Roy said, "No", he was incredulous. "Aw, come on, Roy. Some one of your lovers must have tried to teach you to box. All lovers try that. How many sweeties have you had, anyway? Can you remember all of them?"

The man was like a big woolly dog. Scenes of Old Sheep back in Grass Prairie kept flitting through Roy's mind. It was disconcerting to think of a childhood pet when you were in a hotel

room with a pick-up.

John was carrying on. "You know how many I've had? At least how many I think I've had. Every once in a while I try to sit down and remember every one of them, and then a year or so later it'll dawn on me that I've forgot a couple. But if I haven't left out some here and there, well then, Roy, you make forty-two. That's thirty-eight men and four women. That's really not much of a record. I'm sort of ashamed of myself. But for eighteen years I was married to a woman who was just naturally suspicious. Then there were a couple of stretches when I was trying to be faithful to one man. I'll bet you've had damn near as many as I've had already. Come on, Roy. How many have you had?"

Strange that Roy could not get his mind on lovers. Every time he looked at John he thought of Old Shep.

"Two," he said.

"You're kidding," said John.

John was so comfortable. What else could he do but talk about his two lovers. And the first thing he knew Roy had told practically every detail about both of them. The part about sending twenty-five dollars to Harry made John laugh. But he seemed really sympathetic to learn that Thorpe had ended up doing a jail stretch.

"Where's that Thorpe guy now?" he asked. Roy went on to tell about his trip to Peach Tree Lane, even about Georgia showing up outside his window. The first thing Roy knew he was hearing a familiar noise drift up from the downtown streets. The city water wagon was washing down the gutters. It must be nearly four o'clock.

quickly he told John he must get to work by eight o'clock. John then found out where he worked and said he could fix everything up. He'd have the desk ring them at seven. "That'll give you time to sneak out of here, grab yourself a breakfast and show up at Richards'. Just slip under the blanket and drop off to sleep."

Even with the knowledge that he must be awake and gone in three hours could not induce the slightest feelings of slumber. John dropped off rather quickly, but he proved to be a light sleeper. Roy merely shifted his foot ever so slightly, and the man who had bedded thirty-seven other men popped awake and asked, "You okay?"

"Sure," said Roy.

He was not, though. As the street sweepers washed down Fort Boomer's gutters Grover thought things over. Within a few hours he had ridden the pendulum from hunger to over-eating. And now, with only seventeen cents in his pocket it looked like he was riding it back to hunger again. There ought to be a way to get some more money out of John? Damn the man. He hadn't even offered to treat him to breakfast, but paved the way for him to sneak out at seven while he stayed in and slept late. There ought to be a way to dip into that wad rolled up in his right front pocket. But if he so much as yawned John's eyes would pop open, and he would ask if everything was okay.

Would John listen to a sob story? When he was spilling everything about Thorpe he should have gone on and told about Mrs. Laudermilch locking him out of the dining room. No, something told him it wouldn't work with John. And if he got caught sneaking into his wad he'd end up knotted like a pretzel. No,



tonight had been a brief furlough, but tomorrow he must still find a way to eat. Damn John.

Other sounds floated up from the street, a policeman's whistle, then something like a bottle being broken. Maybe it was a window. A moment later a red glow, one so faint that it must have been reflected upward several times, tinted the slats in the venetian blind. It could only come from the flashing light on a cop's car. Someone was getting arrested.

It made Roy laugh which made John wake up and ask what was funny.

"Nothing. I was dreaming."

What was funny was the theoretical idea that he could be picked up as a whore. Just like the female street walkers he had stuck a sugar daddy for a meal and paid for it by spending the night with him. But he was a boy, and back in Grass Prairie they wouldn't know that members of the male sex did such things. Or did they?

Another funny thing was Roy didn't care whether they knew about such things or not. The sun-baked dust of Western Oklahoma was out of his life forever, he thought. The truth was he thoroughly enjoyed stuffing at The Plantation, and there were worse ways to spend the night than watch John do push-ups.

But there was one big difference between him and an experienced whore. The whore would get at least five dollars for her night's work. It looked like Grover was going to get a meal and a dime. In a bitter sort of way that struck him as funny too.

"You're doing a lot of giggling," John said.

Roy threw off the covers and flipped on the light.

"I haven't got a goddamned cent. I ended up with a landlady who has cut me off from meals. If you hadn't picked me up I would have gone without food last night. Damn it, I want five dollars. 'So there.'" At a time like this he thought there was no need to be exactly correct. He had John's dime and a few cents more, and last evening he had eaten a hamburger.

John, fully awake, lay on the bed and twiddled his toes. "Where do you think you're going to get the five dollars?" he asked after a minute.

"Oh hell," said Roy. He got up, dressed and walked out. Just before he closed the door he heard John's calm voice say, "Righty-night."

Mr. Richards and his wife found him waiting around the door of the printing shop when they drove up at eight o'clock.

"You haven't shaved," said Mrs. Richards. What an eye that woman had. Roy only raked the fuzz off every third morning. True, this was the morning he should have done it, but it still showed she noticed things. However, she did not hang around the door to make other observations. In their place of business there were too many things to do. She shewed him inside and put him to work.

It wasn't until nine-thirty that she took a break to go into the little washroom. Immediately Roy went over to Mr. Richards and began telling the story of his landlady cutting him off from food. The boss hardly had time to set his face into a blank look before his wife popped out of the wash room. There was no evidence she had left some operation suspended. She must have ducked into the wash room just to see what would happen outside.

"Cut you off from food!" she said. "I can't believe it. University students are pampered little things. A landlady couldn't get by with something like that. You must be mistaken." She put a special emphasis on the word "mistaken". Richards began greasing a roller and left the whole situation to his wife.

Roy was firm. "If you don't believe it, call her up," he said. "I've got to have some food."

Mrs. Richards did exactly that. While dialing she tilted her head to one side and assured Roy if he was telling the truth he had nothing to worry about. "Landladies are my specialty. I'll have that biddy straightened out in no time. This is right down my alley."

At first she spoke very sweetly to Mrs. Laudermilch. "How are you? We have a young man working for us who says he lives at your place. Yes, that's his name. Is everything all right at your house?"

Mrs. Richards had to drop a few more leading phrases, then she confidently leaned against the window facing, the receiver clamped between shoulder and titled head, and used her freed hands to sort the mail. At this point in the conversation there was no need to give Mrs. Laudermilch her undivided attention.

After a moment she dropped the mail, straightened up and grasped the receiver firmly. Two furrows appeared between her eyes. The furrows deepened into a frown. She glanced at Roy. "I don't understand," she said into the phone.

Apparently Mrs. Laudermilch was willing to explain in detail. For quite awhile Mrs. Richards just listened. Then

she burst out, "I can't see that any of that concerns me in the least. The fact is somebody's going to have to feed this kid for a few days. That's not our responsibility. He's paid you. So, you're the one to do it. You can't just dump it on us." Another pause, then she said a series of things like, "That's got nothing to do with it. A verbal contract is as legal as a written one. I know. Oh, you're bluffing. I tell you we are not going to get stuck with this. Your whole story doesn't make sense. You can't fool with me. I'm going to call the dean of men."

She flung the receiver back on the hook, put her hands on her hips and glared at Roy. "You're one kid I can't understand," she said. Then she began dialing again. As with Mrs. Lauder-milch she started the conversation with the dean's office very sweetly. "How are you? This is Babette Richards at Richards' printing. I know how busy you are, but I'd like very much to speak to Dr. Rugger personally. I'll wait."

While she waited she looked Roy over. "I don't know what you've done to that woman, but you've really done something. If I have to foot this bill I'll be damned if I don't get to the bottom of this. Hello. Dr. Rugger? Iardon me. Dean Rugger". Then she began telling in considerable detail about a young man working for them who seemed to be in the strangest trouble. Later she let the other side talk for awhile and finally said, "Yes." In the silence that followed the furrows again deepened between her eyebrows. Twice she blew a stray lock of hair away from her face by puffing her breath upward. She began tapping the desk with her right index finger. In an ex-

asperated voice she said, "I don't understand what you're saying at all. And you haven't understood what I'm talking about. This kid says he's without food. You say he's probably telling the truth. Well, do you mean to sit there and tell me you're not going to do anything about it? Well, I'll tell you something. We're not going to get stuck with the bill either. We pay taxes for you to run that school right. It's your job to straighten out--"

By now she was breathing very heavily. Several times she glared at Roy, and several times she told the dean she didn't understand. Then she whipped out a longer phrase. "You're talking about lawyer. I can talk about lawyer too. We have our pay day. We told him what it was before he started work. I happen to know the law won't make us shell out a thing before then. As for you, you're beating around a whole lot of bushes without telling anything. You're not going to put that over on the Richards' printing Company. It's your responsibility--"

She broke off to listen to something coming over the phone that must have been as hot as what she was delivering. Mr. Richards, who was now flattened on his back reaching under the big machine to grease and insert, said, "We can fix it up with Barney to feed him over in his cafe until next Monday. He'll have to pay Barney off before he gets a full check from us. It won't cost us anything."

This idea seemed to break Mr. Richards' buffiness, and she again got sweet with the dean. Pretty soon she said, "Oh, all right. We'll take care of it. All right. Here, you speak to him."

She passed the receiver to Roy then threw up her hands and said she was going back to the washroom.

Roy heard Dean Rugger's voice coming over the wire. "Hello, Crover. Have you got anything to tell me?" The tone of his voice was pleasant, too pleasant to be congruent with the conversation he had just spoken with Mrs. Richards. The question annoyed Roy. "What have I got to tell you?" he said shortly. "I thought you had something to tell me, like Mrs. Laufermilch would have to give me the meals I've paid for--"

The dean cut in quickly. "We're not going into that. Mrs. Laufermilch is a very fine lady. We're going to leave everything there just like it is. Now, do you have anything to tell me?"

Why no, Roy did not.

"Are you sure?" asked the dean.

It was Roy's turn to say he didn't understand and to declaim that a contract was a contract. It did him no good. The dean merely pointed out that he was now supplied with food. The lady he had just spoken too was willing to foot his bill. "The university can assume no responsibility for emergencies and unexpected costs. Every place of business has to keep a sinking fund. You'll have to learn to keep one too. I'm sorry. I'd be breaking University rules if I tried to interfere in your problems. Are you sure you don't have something to tell me?"

Barney's restaurant was a block away from Richards'. This was convenient during the hours Roy was working at the printing shop, but at all other times it meant he had to walk

from Twenty-eighth to Rowntown to get a meal. It also meant he would have to stretch his seventeen cents of spending money to last until next Monday at the least. God, if only he could get another pick-up like John.

After each of the three remaining performances of Hedda Gabler he mingled in the lobby between scenes and at the end hung around the stage door until the crowd had filed out of the auditorium. By Friday night the night watchman assigned to patrol the area began to look at him suspiciously. Saturday night Roy counteracted this by flirting with the watchman himself. But all it got him was a discussion of the relative merits of a Ford over a Plymouth. No man, young, old, fat or slim gave him so much as a nod.

Saturday night also left him with only two cents in his pocket. To keep up with the crowd of backstage spenders he was forced into blowing a nickle a night for a bag of peanuts. They gave him indigestion.

Dejected, he crept home after that last performance and swore he would get away from this old German woman as fast as he could. Tomorrow he might even run over to Dolores's house and beg her to put him up for one night until the mail would come Monday morning. He did not let himself think of the possibility that his dad might not come through with a check. Instead he began packing. Tonight he would get everything but his pyjamas ready to pick up and leave, and tomorrow, somehow, he would get away from this place.

He opened up his suitcase. Something was wrong, but it took him several minutes to figure out exactly what. Then he

remembered. Before Thanksgiving he had left that little package for Malcolm in his suitcase. Tonight it wasn't there.

Damn Mrs. Jaudermilch. She had swiped it. Even though it was after eleven o'clock he would challenge her. He marched back to her little bedroom and pounded on her door.

"What happened to the package in my suitcase?" he called.

He heard noises that she was getting out of bed, other noises indicating she was dressing. He heard footsteps cross about eight feet of flooring and the key turn in her lock. Then she stuck her head out, an old woman with her long hair let down over her shoulders for the night.

"I turned that package over to the police," she said. "It was dope." She closed the door.

Roy was speechless. What had his eleven o'clock bravery gotten him into? Dope? Did she mean narcotics? She must. She seemed so sure of herself. Meekly he lifted his hand to rap on her door and summons more information. But he let his hand fall without touching the panel. If she was telling the truth he had very little ground to stand on. The slightest excuse and she would call the police again. He tip-toed back to his room and sat on his bed staring at the empty suitcase.

The police. Dope. What had that fool, Dolores, gotten him into? Damn the woman. And to think he was almost of a mind to rent her vacant room. Damn her. She had deliberately used him as a sucker.

All sorts of things began to make sense. That word, "snack", it must mean some kind of narcotic. Malcolm's brilliance dulled to ineffectiveness, his borrowing money, his flight to Mexico,



perhaps for a cure, perhaps to sink further into the mire, all fitted together.

Now closely he had skirted a chasm of calamities. Well, he was innocent. If Mrs. Laudermilch had called the police there was no reason why he couldn't go right down to the police station himself and explain everything. He certainly would not leave out Dolores's part in it. He could go tonight.

But he stopped in his tracks. Something else was clear. He had already "contacted" the police. How many fifty-eight year old men can do seventy push-ups? Not one in ten-thousand, unless he happens to be a policeman. Undercover man "John" had already checked him out. Since he was still running around free John must have decided he was innocent, at least of the dope charges. But now, the cops certainly knew he was homosexual. He had better watch out. If they wanted him out of the way they could easily lure him into a trap with another good-looking man. No, tonight he had better try to get some sleep, and tomorrow he could think things out.

Sunday morning dawned with uncertain meteorological signs. The sun arose in a fairly clear sky. But things did not warm up quickly. The chilly breeze that blew might die down or it might get worse. Those preparing to go to church did not know how to dress. When the sermon was over would they be in the midst of a blizzard or would they be basking in the tail end of an Indian summer?

Roy was not a church goer, and what to wear was the least of his worries. His most nagging problem was how to kill the next twenty-four hours with only two cents in his pocket. It

would be impossible to hole up in the library and study. He was on the verge of too many uncertainties. If his dad's check did not arrive in tomorrow's mail he would again have to beg somebody for food. Then the dope business and its many ramifications was far from settled. A disastrous new fumerole of trouble could break loose from that direction at any moment. By mid-morning he decided his best move was to clear as much of the problem out of the way as possible.

He must go see Dolores. He must let her know he had found out what was in the package she had palmed off on him. It was important to size her up and see what sort of woman she really was. Would she blatantly laugh at him for being such a sucker? Would she pretend innocence? Would she come up with some entirely new angle that would clear things up or make them worse? Whatever it was to be he must face it and smoke it out.

Vinnie was in the front yard wearing heavy leather work gloves. She was not handling hot coals of fire, but was trying to wield an oversize grain scoop with one hand and a long handled garden rake with the other. She had a problem. A neighbor's dog had "nestied" in her front yard, and this Sunday morning she was staging a dramatic scene of raking up the still moist turd. Her first words to Roy were not "good morning". They were, "Look at this nastiness. I know who did it too. And I am going to put a stop to it. I'm going to rake it up and dump it on that Mitchell women's doorstep."

She would not answer Roy's inquiry if Dolores were in, but told him to ring the bell and find out. By the time Mrs. Fox answered his ring Vinnie had eased the turd into the scoop

and was marching off with it to get revenge. Two doors up a woolly English sheep dog barked at her challengingly as she advanced, scoop and rake in hand.

Dolores looked a little dismayed to see Roy, and he took this as a sign she was guilty. "You didn't phone," she said as she stood at the sill holding the door a quarter of the way open. "We didn't know you were coming. Is something wrong?"

Again, he took the "something wrong" as a sign of guilt. Certainly it would be better to let her get a little further off base before he sprung the dope business. So he assumed a cheerful, confident stance and told her he was here to inquire about her room for rent. He was careful not to state flatly that he wanted the room, merely that he was inquiring about it. This should get him inside the door and get the conversation started. It didn't work very well.

"Oh dear," said Dolores. "You've showed up at one of the few times left for me to practice. This afternoon I'm singing for a funeral. I haven't even picked out my three songs much less rehearsed them. I can practice only while Vinnie is out doing the gardening. She can't stand to be in the house while I'm singing. Sunday mornings she allows herself two hours to tidy up the yard. I'll have to make use of every minute of this time. My sister simply goes wild if she comes back in the house and I'm still practicing."

Roy quickly got around this hurdle. "I'd love to sit and listen to you sing. I've never heard you, and I promise I won't bother at all." It was easy to put the ring of truth in this statement because he was really eager to hear her. If

ever he should want to move into her garage room--right now nothing could induce him to do that--one of the main attractions would be the opportunities to hear an ex-opera singer practice. Opera. That word represented glamour beyond anything he had dreamed of in Oklahoma. Perhaps this morning he was getting a chance to hear some of it. Even better, he would be hearing it in a personal atmosphere, as though he were a part of the true, professional circle. Such a delight almost made him forget his reason for coming.

She seemed surprised at the sincerity in his voice. It got him inside. "You really do want to hear me. Come in. I'm afraid you're going to be aghast at the way I have to rehearse. It's not only Vinnie who throws a fit. It's the neighbors."

Roy was aghast. It seems the grand piano, which still took up most of the living room space, was going to be used only to plunk a few chords to get her on the right key. Then she would rush some where else to do her singing. For this dozen or so notes she had opened the piano top like a ship in full sail and had folded back the bench pad to reveal its stuffed compartment of sheet music. She had already scattered out a few yellowing scores on the "Uncan Phye. Picking up a couple of these she tossed Roy a question. "Do you play any Mozart, any Bach?"

Roy had to admit he could play nothing at all.

"When Malcolm was here he could do piano accompaniment he'd in the living, but I could hear him back in my cell. That way the neighbors heard only the piano. They don't seem to mind the piano. But it doesn't matter if you don't play. I can strike the pitch chords myself then rush back to my

closet. Go back in the hall. You can sit by the telephone."

As Roy opened one of the doors to get to the centrally located hall she picked up one of the yellow scores and struck a few chords on the piano. Then she raced passed Roy to open a little door mid-way along the short hall. It must have been located in the dead center of the house. The space which she revealed was probably designed as a linen closet. But all the shelves had been taken out, and the four by six foot area was painted, sides, top, and even on the floor, with warehouse quilting. There wasn't even a light to dangle from the ceiling. Her only illumination was from the small bulb lost in the shadows of the upper portion of the hall. But she cleared her throat, assumed a shoulders-back posture and began singing. Roy, not more than five feet from her, sat on the stool by the telephone niche.

Grover was enthralled. His only introduction to operatic singing had been a few phonograph records and an occasional concert over the radio. He was no connoisseur, but she sounded even better than the scattered examples of great singing that he had heard before. It was even more marvelous because the terrible acoustics and bad seating arrangement detracted much from her delivery. At her first break he applauded with true appreciation.

"A shame you don't have the chance to hear a really first rate singer," she said. "You seem to enjoy it so much."

Roy couldn't believe that someone sang better than she. "Oh, thank you," she said. "I'm far from the best. But I do try to keep in practice. Thank you so much for your kind words."

She was too subservient. It annoyed Roy. Why on earth would a first rate opera singer let Vinnie and the neighbors drive her into a padded tomb in the center of the house? If they didn't like sopranos she should tell them to go jump in the lake. And for what was all this practicing? To ornament a few funerals and weddings? Why didn't she get out from Fort Boomer?

Funerals. They seemed so sad, just like Dolores herself.

"Do you mind if I practice scales. Most people can't stand a vocalist's exercises."

Roy's, "Of course not," was a little bit curt. He closed his eyes and listened to her voice ascend and descend. On and on she went mixing abstract "Ah's" with real arias sung in several foreign languages.

A little wrist alarm watch she was wearing went off. "Forty-five minutes," she said. "It's time for a rest. If you like we could look at the garage room during the break. I'll have ten minutes before I start again."

Roy shuffled his feet. He was feeling guilty about using the garage room, which he had no intention of renting, to worm his way into her house. How could he confront a woman who could sing in French, German and Italian with something so messy as narcotics? But it was time to be honest.

"I've come about something else," he said. "I might as well tell it straight off. That package you gave me for Malcolm. I never found Malcolm. I put the package in my suitcase. The landlady broke into it. She took it to the police. It was dope."

Dolores face became expressionless. "Dope? You mean aspirin or something?"

"Yes," she said, just said, "dope."

"Mrs. Laudermilch? You mean the police didn't talk to you personally?"

Roy again shuffled his feet. There was no answer he could give that would be entirely free of the taint of lying. He said, "No."

Dolores's attitude was strange. For a while she acted as though they really were talking of nothing more serious than aspirin. But after a moment her well modulated voice began to get hoarse. "I need a drink of water," she said and opened the door in the far end of the hall to get into the kitchen. Roy followed. It was a relief to be out of the shadowy tomb and into the gleaming white fixtures of the kitchen. A big carboy of distilled water was mounted on an easel frame by the sink. Dolores tipped it to pour herself a generous drink of pure H<sub>2</sub>O.

The water seemed to un-do her. Suddenly, she sucked in her breath and said, "Dope. You mean smack, sugar, heroin. You mean you're mixed up in that stuff too?"

"No. At least not until now," said Roy.

"That stuff," she said. Oh, God, do I have to get balled up with that night mare again? It's Malcolm's fault. That boy will ruin us yet. Oh why couldn't he be a normal boy and do the things normal boys do? Why couldn't he have normal, straight friends? Why do I have to get mixed up with something that should concern only men? I'm a woman. I don't have anything to do with his crowd. I don't have anything to do with your crowd. This is terrible. Roy, you've got to be mistaken. That package was a safety razor set a certain man mailed to him. I opened it myself. A razor, a package of blades, a brush and a little plastic rack for it. A normal gift because Malcolm is just

beginning to shove."

"How did it turn into Jopel?" said Roy.

Instead of answering him she began pacing the floor.

"You don't know what Winnie and I have been through. We're too lone women. Neither of us should be saddled with raising children, especially ones with special problems. Oh yes, Winnie thinks she's a natural mother. She's anything but. Malcolm should have been left in my care, not that I'd make a better parent, but, at least, I have sense enough to know my limitations. How do you know Mrs. Laufermilch went to the police? Did you see any policemen? Did you talk to any policemen?"

Roy again chose to say, "No."

"Could any one get into your room? You don't have a lot of boy friends running in and out of your place, do you?"

"No."

"How about grown men? How about that Larry Thorpe? You aren't seeing him, are you?"

Briefly, Roy re-created a mental picture: A clear, cold night. The moon had gone down. No red had yet appeared in the east. Larry Thorpe's wife was racing a Model A motor outside his window. But that was his wife, not Larry himself.

"No," he said. "When did you open the package? Could someone have slipped in this house and switched contents?"

Dolores sighed and began pacing the floor. Nervously she plowed her fingers through her hair. "It was a little over a year ago when Malcolm got hooked on that stuff. It was while he was recovering from an idiotic hunting trip, when he got shot. Maybe it was the doctor's fault that he got addicted.



Maybe it was someone else's. For a year Vinnie and I have been fighting with each other about what to do. I finally convinced her Malcolm had to go away, to get an entirely new environment. But it looks like his "friends" will never quit. Precisely what sort of trouble are you in? If the police didn't contact you what have you got to worry about?"

It was time for Roy to tell her exactly what he wanted. "No one contacted me, but someone spoke to the dean of men. Mrs. Laudermilch is throwing me out of her house. Maybe no one has spoken to me, but they know about me. I thought you could call up the police, tell them the package had a razor in it when you gave it to me, then they'd know where I got it."

She threw back her head and laughed. "How would that clear you? If it was a razor when you got it, that would mean only you could switch it to smack."

Roy did not know how to put over the point he was trying to bring out. If she would only confess to the police that she had something--anything--to do with the package, they would know it came from a house where a dope addict used to live. The police might be more likely to believe his story than hers.

But he did not have a chance to bring out this point either directly or indirectly. The kitchen door opened and Vinnie came rushing in.

"We're in the war," she said. "Quit your singing and turn on the radio."

This old woman with bad feet swept through the kitchen and into the living room. In a moment they heard static crackling over the console model radio.

Roy and Dolores looked at each other. War? Really war?

The news might be startling, but neither saw any reason to move from the kitchen. The truth was neither knew whether to believe Vinnie's announcement or not. Even when she turned up the radio so that the full volume almost deafened them in the kitchen and the words "bombs" and Pearl Harbor" were spattered like verbal stucco, it still might be a trick. Mrs. Dollop would go to any lengths to break up a rehearsal.

Yet neither of them dared openly to down play the dramatic announcement of war. Vinnie was spinning the dial from station to station, and every one of them blared the same news. War, if true, meant men, and later boys, being called up for training. They would face death. Roy remembered his third grade back in Antelope Wells. The school trustees had somehow gotten enough money to buy a magic lantern. The salesman, as a bonus, offered them a choice of one set of slides free. They could choose any set in his catalogue. Unanimously they choose "The World War: Destruction in France and Belgium". Over and over his mother had shown those slides to her spellbound pupils. But he remembered the thing that had spellbound him was not the "after" shots with their piles of rubble, it was the "before" ones with all the vaulted arches and ornate church spires. It was his first glimpse of the grandeurs of the old world.

Similarly, now he could not bring himself to panic at the thought of some far off misery. When Vinnie burst into the kitchen he had been locked in a battle of wits with Mrs. Fox. It was important that he clear his good name. Dolores, from a point of honor, ought to help him do it. There was no reason why a respectable adult like her should mind calling up the

cops, candidly telling all about the safety razor, and in that way contribute her bit to the solution of the mystery. Yes, she would be faced with some slight danger that the police might pounce on to her, but she was an adult, on the down hill side of middle age, she could hold her own with them. Roy, as a kid felt he should be taken off the hook.

But it looked like she had no intention of making such a sacrifice. She stood in the middle of the kitchen floor and repeated the word "war" three times. It did not come out with horror stricken overtones, but was more of a mumble, spoken as though she were pronouncing this safe word instead of others that she was keeping dammed up.

"Pearl Harbor," she finally said, vacantly. "That sounds familiar, but I can't place it. The Philippenes maybe? Oh, bother. Who cares?"

"I've never heard of it," said Roy.

"Wherever it is I have to sing at a funeral this afternoon. My two hours rehearsal time is not up. Vinnie has to get out of this house."

She marched into the living room and began telling her sister the same words. Vinnie retaliated that Dolores was a heartless fool to think of singing when the country was plunged into war. For a while Dolores let Mrs. Dollop make her points. But the fact that she was being cheated out of rehearsal time was too galling. They broke into bickering which covered a host of scores still unsettled between them. Vinnie was to clean the yard. Dolores was to clean the house. But did the yard work mean picking up garbage that had spilled over the sides of the can in the alley? Did housework mean hanging up

a soiled slip that had been kicked under the bed? Charges and counter charges were mingled with the question of whether singing should go on while bombs were falling.

"Those Japs came along at a damned convenient time for you," Dolores said. "You're hell bent on pushing their bombs for all they're worth. No, you couldn't wait so much as five minutes to tell me about them. The instant you had an excuse to do so you busted into the house and ruined my rehearsal."

"A fine lot of rehearsing you were doing back in the kitchen. You weren't singing. You were gabbing with that kid."

There was no way either side could win just as there was no way either one could break off without losing face. Finally, Dolores began crying and Vinnie laughed at her. Mrs. Fox flounced back to the kitchen to get a drink of water to soothe her precious throat. She saw Roy was still there.

"I thought you had gone home," she said. "Well, go home now. Everything's in a mess here. Oh, wait a minute. You said something about renting the garage room. You can take it or leave it. I don't care what you do. It's ten dollars a month."

Roy said, "We were talking about the package." Just as the war could not keep Dolores from thinking of her rehearsal, Grover could not forget his reason for walking twenty-odd blocks to speak to her.

"Package," she screamed. "Forget that silly package. The police haven't even bothered you. Why are you crying about a package? You're letting the words "police" and "dope" scare you. Can the sound of those words split your ear drums? No.

Can they send you into a jibbering fit? No. Wait until you are hurt before you start screaming. About that room. You'd better not stay here. It won't be right for you. It won't be right for Vinnie and me. We can't take in a roomer who's too young to mind his own business. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but kids might as well get it blunt once in a while. It looks like we're in a war. It won't be long until you'll be getting it a lot blunter in the army. I'm sorry. You'll have to leave. Good bye."

When he got home the shock waves of Pearl Harbor had reached the Laudermilch household. They had brought the landlady out into the hall to meet him. She even spoke.

"Do you know we're in the war?" she asked.

Roy was of a mind to use the opportunity to ask for his fifty cent key deposit back, but by this time the Japanese bombing had also mellowed him some what. He only said, "Yes," and started to go into his room.

She stopped him with another gesture of good will. "You got a special delivery letter. It came about a hour ago." She handed him a small white envelope, the Woolworth special type. It was post marked, "Grass Prairie, Okla." Roy's father had sent him a special delivery letter, probably the first one he had ever mailed in his life.

"Ah," Roy sighed his relief. "Thank you, Mrs. Laudermilch. You're so kind."

The world might be going up in bombs, but it looked like his crisis was over.

It was. Ted Grover had responded to his pleas with over-

whelming generosity. Wrapped inside his single sheet of writing-tablet stationery was a check. It was not a mere stop-gap aid of ten or fifteen dollars, but was written for the astonishing amount of fifty dollars. On top of that it was certified. He could find a drug store that would cash it today.

Mrs. Laudermilch had retreated to her kitchen. For her the comradeship arising from a newly opened war had spent itself with the one gesture of meeting him in the hall. She locked the door. During their recent lunch she must have served her daughters sauerkraut. Its pungent odor lingered in the hall.

Sauerkraut. She could eat it for the rest of her days for all Roy cared. In a few moments he would be eating a steak.

The waitress at The Plantation sat the dessert before him. Slowly Roy forked it into his mouth. Within an hour he had cashed the check, rented a room in a nice looking boarding house and had taxied down to The Plantation. Now he leaned back in the restaurant's ornate chair and took his father's letter out of his pocket. He began to read the cramped handwriting. Ted spelled badly. His syntax was on the fourth grade level. His half-Indian mother had seen no reason to force her sons into Oklahoma's bothersome schools.

"Dear Roy," the letter began. "I shure am sorry you kneed money. It must cost to go to those expansive--" and here some lettering had been marked out. Apparently his dad had thought to write the word "university" and had given up. "--skools. I will send fifty. I will try my best to send it every month. I shure am sorry I did not send all I was sposed to. Now I will

send it reglar.

"The wheat is good. Your grandma and grandpa have got a oil lease. Your loving Dad, Ted Grover."

Fifty dollars every month. Far better than he had hoped for. It meant the end of shabby little rooms and crabby landladies. After a moment he realized it also meant the end of the part-time job at the tight-fisted Mr. Richards'. He would go back to the printing press only to collect his pay check on the day it was due. For the moment Pearl Harbor was, indeed, very far away.

#### Part IV The Room over the Garage

Just before Christmas Roy got a walk-on in a play. Miss Sorenson stopped him in the hall one day and asked him if he could come to rehearsals for Heaven Can Wait that night in a suit. "You'll have to be dressed up. You'll be a departed soul stepping off an airplane and into eternity," she explained. Even though Roy's suit was in the cleaners he said, "Of course I can. I'll be glad to step into anything if it will get me before an audience."

As fate would have it only an hour later he was walking down the street and came face to face with Larry Thorpe. He was hurrying passed the nursing home to get to the cleaners when he looked up, and there the handsome man was.

If either of them had a moment of consternation neither of them showed it. After a second Thorpe's face broke into a smile and he said with a vacant sort of emphasis, "Hello there."

Ever since the dope incident Roy had sworn that if he

ever met Thorpe again he would act casual, even cold. So, he too said, "Hello".

Larry had just stepped out of a new looking car. It was the Ford Roy had seen in the garage on Peach Tree Lane. Apparently he was off duty even though it was the middle of the afternoon. He was not wearing the Farnsworth uniform but a rather sporty looking civilian outfit. On his feet were cowboy boots, yellow decorated with red and blue diamonds. He had left one of the beautiful boot tops outside the gabardine slacks. The other, perhaps as a tribute to modesty, was covered by the neatly pressed pants leg. He wore a starched white shirt. The collar was left open. On top of the shirt was an expensive looking yellow leather jacket, almost the same shade as the boots. The bottom button of the jacket was left undone so you could see the swirling design of a silver belt buckle.

Most surprising of all was his face. He had grown a lush blonde beard. It did not really make him unrecognizable, but it disguised his age. He might have been a man any where between twenty-five and fifty. A thought flashed through Roy's mind: "You can't tell if he's of military age or not."

He also noted that Thorpe's full beard pushed the boundaries of fashion to the limit. Six months ago if a man had appeared on the streets in a bushy beard he would have been chalked up as an unacceptable freak. But with the draft and the war various oddities of dress had cropped up. Now, a man could just barely get by with a beard.

You couldn't tell what was on Thorpe's mind. Slowly he approached and held out his hand as though he couldn't place



Roy. "Let's see. Aren't you the kid I saw at the Triple X?" he said.

Perhaps the beard had fascinated Roy. He found it impossible to remain as cool as he had planned. A little bit too eagerly he set Larry right. "No, it was River Terrace. You know when you were fixing the mirror."

"Mirror?" Thorpe's face was so hard to read. He might have been asking a question, he might have only been repeating a word.

"Just before Jones died."

Then Thorpe connected the boy with the right time and place. He laughed, a soft laugh that didn't mean much. "Nice to see you again," he said. His voice was non-committal, but he was still pressing Roy's palm with a prolonged handshake. The man's signals were so confusing. Did he want to renew the acquaintance, or did he want to drop it all?

"I'm going to college now," Roy said, and for no logical reason he found himself adding, "and soon I'm going to be in a play."

~~These~~ sentences did not get the conversation rolling in any recognizable direction. Thorpe's face, what Roy could see of it, still held a pleasantly abstract look. He said, "My wife's inside."

Roy interpreted this low, off-hand statement as a warning not to show any signs of affection. So he dropped Thorpe's hand. But he was not able to walk off and end the meeting. He found himself explaining more about his college life, where he lived-- a boarding house on Thirty-first--even his telephone number.

Through all of this the ex-bus driver smiled, nodded twice and said "Yes" once. In a moment he broke in and said, "I'm going to be at the Triple X about eight o'clock tonight."

Roy knew the Triple X, a little hamburger joint that specialized in a bubbly kind of root beer. He bit his lip to cut off his words. He must resume his plan. "Oh, gee," he said. "I'm going to have rehearsals tonight."

For the first time Thorpe's face showed a definite expression. The lines between his eyes were not deep, but they were a frown. "Oh," he said.

Roy became glib again. He explained he absolutely could not skip a rehearsal. The only excuse for that was severe illness or a death in the family. He would never be considered for another part in a play if he didn't show up.

"Rehearsals?" mused Thorpe dryly. "A play or something." His body was now turned away from Roy, and as he was leaving he said, "Well, go to it, Kid." He strode off with his beautiful boots into the nursing home.

Roy stood on the sidewalk watching him go inside. In one of the broad front windows he glimpsed a face. Mrs. Thorpe had been watching them.

So Grover got more cold shoulder than he had given out. Never mind. There would still be time to teach Thorpe a lesson.

Roy did not see Larry again until the middle of February. He kept an eye out for him throughout January. During his spare moments he walked by various banks, and twice during that month he was able to spot the Farnsworth Armored Car crew delivering money. But neither time was Thorpe a part of the three man crew.

An older fellow was driving. With his clean shaven face it was easy to fix his age, around fifty. Probably he was an ex-policeman. He was still in excellent shape and carried himself as though he had been proud of his physique all his life. His mouth was set in a perpetual pout as though he had spent all the fifty years of his life fighting odds. Two slightly younger fellows performed the raised pistol guard by the bank doors. Both were husky types, but they showed signs of wear. One was thin and gaunt, the other sprouted the beginnings of a pot.

At least two of these fellows must have known Thorpe and had been his companions. The fact that Larry was not with them worried Roy. Had he changed jobs, left town, got into another scrape? Any way it was worth while looking these three fellows over. You can tell a lot about a man by the company he keeps. Roy had to admit these three did not show up very well. You would place them as drifters, job-hoppers. Now that the war was on you automatically looked every man over to judge if he was soldier material. These were too old for the draft in its present form. But their athletic qualities suggested they might volunteer. Drifters often did stretches in the service. However, when you looked more closely you doubted if any of these would be eager for war time duty. What was it they had that soldiers did not? Craftiness, perhaps.

In the middle of February Larry showed up as part of the crew again. Quite unexpectedly Grover spotted him one day. The same driver with the pout was unloading bags of silver, and Thorpe was standing to the right of the bank's door. He had taken the place of the fellow with the gaunt look. Roy also

noticed the fellow with the pot had been replaced by a man who held his head too far forward. If the driver was the boss of the Farnsworth outfit he was having trouble keeping help.

Where had Thorpe been during the month of January? Of course the ex-bus driver showed no signs of recognizing Grover. Of the three he kept his pose the most erect and frozen. The beard still covered half of his face, and he had taken to wearing heavily tinted glasses. Few people would be able to read his mind.

Roy, too, pretended he did not see Thorpe. Briskly, he walked on down the sidewalk and did his sizing up with two quick glances out of the sides of his eyes.

The second week in March Grover glimpsed Larry on duty again. The beard and glasses were still there, and he had his usual place to the right of the bank door. The best you could tell he kept looking straight ahead, but Roy noticed he made one quick movement. With the hand that wasn't holding the pistol he broke the guardsman's pose to hitch up his trousers. It was an unconscious gesture to make himself slightly more presentable.

Roy went whole-hog in his interpretation of it. Thorpe, in a reflex movement, had spruced himself up because Grover was walking by. The kid was aglow the rest of the day.

A week later he saw him again. He didn't spot a preening gesture. All he saw was the guard on the left had again been changed. The new one, who represented at least four replacements in the Farnsworth crew, was youngish, perhaps thirty. Why would someone so ripe as that not be in the army?

Nowadays you were always wondering why men were not in

The first week of April Roy was cast in his first big part. It was a somewhat unlikely part for a seventeen year old boy from Oklahoma. He was to be an RA F pilot. The play's authoress had left the heroe's exact social background indefinite. The stage directions only said he was "typical of the many English pilots fighting to save their homeland."

Miss Sorenson was ultimately chosen as directress. It was she who cast Roy. During try-outs she said she was "delighted" with the play and explained that those ~~chosen~~ would be taking part in an exciting experiment. They would be the original cast of a brand new theatrical work.

Just how the brand new theatrical work came about was interesting. Shortly after Pearl Harbor the drama department used some of the University's ample oil royalties to sponsor a play writing contest of national scope. They ran announcements about it in January's Theater Arts magazine as well as in all the other major theatrical journals. Any one was qualified to enter the contest. Competing authors must submit a play of at least three acts in length. The subject matter must be related to the war effort. The winner would be ~~given~~ a two hundred dollar prize. In addition all his expenses would be paid to come and stay in Fort Boomer during a four week period when the winning play would be in rehearsal and performance.

Back in January the faculty of the Department had a squabble about who would judge the contest. First, Dr. Parkson, the departmental head, appointed a committee of three as judges, Mr. McKay, Dr. Vaught and Miss Sorenson. But the last of January Dr. Parks was drafted leaving the department under the

guidance of Mr. McKay. One of McKay's first acts was to resign from the contest committee. For some reason he felt departmental heads should not judge contests. It would show partiality, and to demonstrate the extent of his fairness he appointed his arch enemy, Beulah Astor, to take his place. Roy, for one, was disgusted. Did the man have to fall over backwards to show he was fair?

By the time the manuscripts came pouring in Beulah and Miss Sorenson were quarreling. One day Miss Sorenson threw up her hands and would have nothing to do with judging the contest. McKay tried to make peace between the two women. He failed. To make matters look even blacker Dr. Vaught volunteered for the navy. The judging committee was now reduced to one member, Beulah. McKay solved the problem by leaving it that way. His rationale was, "Three reduces things to mediocrity. A lone member has a better chances of picking the truly brilliant." This explanation suited Miss Astor so well that she said something nice about McKay in each of her classes. "He's handsome. Mmmm! Really sharp," was what she said in History of the Drama.

Beulah announced her choice the first week in March. "It just stands out head and shoulders above all the others," she said. "A blind man would have picked this one." The choice was titled A Rose Grows on the White Cliffs of Dover and was written by someone from New York named Dol Abbol. Mr. McKay got busy on the production at once. Announcements of the winner were sent to all the theatrical journals. Mr. McKay contacted the author in New York and arranged for four performances to come off the last week in April. "Rose" would be the drama department's last major production of the '41-'42 season.

McKay was inclined toward the sentimental, so he noted that the scheduling of "Rose" was significant. "It's not just the last major of the season," he said. "It's the last under the old system. A couple of us ought to go to Bernice's and drink a bottle of beer to it."

As far as anyone knew no faculty members were so daring as to drink the beer toast, but his remark did make the students realize times were changing. The "old system" he referred to was the University's practice of having two long semesters per year, the fall and spring, separated by a short summer school. Beginning in June the school's board of regents were changing over to a three equal semesters a year. They did this as a contribution to the war effort. Most students skipped the summer session, but with three long, uninterrupted sessions all would be expected to go the year round. Students would not be frittering away the summer months, but would be sacrificing their vacation time for study. They would be ready for war work that much quicker.

The June switch-over would have another effect on the drama department. Even though the pupils would be studying the year round the head of the school thought it would be out of keeping with the austere war program to increase the number of theatrical performances. They must stick with four, that is four major ones to be performed in the main auditorium. Mr. McKay did beg for and get permission to put on two extra productions in the department's small experimental theater. He had to promise not to advertise these performances excessively.

So the production of "Rose" was a milestone for several

reasons, and Roy was thrilled to get the male lead. Few first year students got such an honor. It was true many boys had been drafted, but there was still enough stiff competition around for a lead role to represent a triumph.

From the beginning Roy was afraid his Okie accent would make his version of an RAF pilot comical. But Miss Sorenson promised to help him on it.

Miss Sorenson was named director the first of April. McKay, in another one of his attempts to balance everything fairly, assigned her the job. Surprisingly, Beulah didn't seem to mind. Her interest in the play disappeared as soon as she had selected the winner.

Miss Sorenson got to work on Roy's diction at once. "I'm sure you'll sound fine," she said, bolstering his confidence. "We'll start on the diphthongs." Accents were one of Miss Sorenson's specialties, and in a few days she had him sounding passably British.

The "author" arrived a day before the rehearsals actually began. Everyone, with the possible exception of Beulah, was surprised. Dol Abbot turned out to be an authoress. She was thirtyish and had a special poise. The poise showed up even more noticeably because last January she had broken her leg in a subway accident. It was while she was laid up in the hospital that she had written "Rose", and now in April she was still walking with a cane. She controlled her movements so well that, if anything, the cane made her look more regal.

Although Dol talked very little details of her background got around. Of course she had been writing plays since her late teens, but she made her living as a Powers model. For ten



years she had worked through that famous agency. She looked the part. You could easily imagine her, even with a cane, promenading in a Paris original. Within a day's time half the girls were trying to copy her walk down to the limp.

Roy was disappointed with her. She didn't warm to him at all and never made any comments on his performance. She seldom commented on anything even when Miss Sorenson invited her to do so. During rehearsals she was little more than a vague form sitting alone on some back row of the auditorium occasionally twisting in her seat to give her leg a rest.

It seems she had met Beulah Astor some where before, just where and how no one found out. The two seldom appeared together on the campus. That was not necessary. They shared the same apartment.

The University had reserved a room for Dol in one of Fort Boomer's best hotels, but she turned it down without even looking at it. "It's too far from the campus," she said. "I'd have to take a taxi to get here. It wouldn't work. My cane, you know."

Just what wouldn't work about a taxi was not clear because Dol chose to walk each day the six block's distance from Beulah's apartment to the auditorium. "Doctor's advice," she explained, one of the few explanations this statuesque woman bothered to make. As further proof that she was an individual who lived by superior rules she did not smoke nor even consume soft drinks. Often you could see her cracking sun flower seeds and touching out the pits with her tongue. Roy wondered how one so fastidious about her health got along with Beulah's

As soon as Miss Sorenson was made directress rehearsals began. When the drama department was founded some ten years previously Dr. Farkson immediately instilled a reverence for attending rehearsals. If any thing the reverence had become more awesome during the insuing years instead of diminishing. The students now believed that professional actors met all schedules without fail. They must be like professionals. Only two excuses were grave enough to cause one to skip play practice, severe sickness and a death in the immediate family. You must also be ready to rehearse or perform at any hour of any day of the week. In the rest of Fort Doomer Sunday was still a day of worship, and most university activities respected this tradition. But members of the drama department knew that they must sacrifice Saturday night dates as well as Sunday's day of rest. Both Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons were rehearsal times.

Mr. McKay carried on the tradition of hard, punctilious work. Perhaps his scoldings were louder than old Dr. Farkson's had been. But you could notice there was a slight laxness on the rule of perform-or-bust since he got in charge. "Severe sickness" had once been stretched to include a cold. However only the most perceptive had noticed the slight taint of laxness. Most students still carried on the tight discipline with pride.

All rehearsals had to be over by ten-thirty because university rules demanded all women students be inside their dormitories by eleven o'clock. The first night of practice Miss Sorenson held them to the last minute. When the second hand of the wall clock reached half past ten she penciled a line under the last speech that they had blocked out on stage and

told them that would be all.

For Roy it was too early to get back to his boarding house. A room mate with adenoids and a fixation to pull practical jokes was not someone to rush home to. First he would take a little walk. For some reason he found himself ambling passed the nursing home on Vaca Street. All seemed dark behind the home's brick fence and side rows of poplars. The one twenty-five watt bulb over the front door only made the surrounding shadows blacker. He shuddered a little then turned northward toward Bernice's.

Bernice's Club was much more brightly lit, and the crowd inside was just beginning to thicken. She did not close until one o'clock. On impulse Roy entered for a beer. Since he was alone he had to sit at the counter. Bernice, herself, was busy flirting with a man three stools down, and her husband was doing a plodding job of washing a supply of cups. It was a moment before he turned to ask Roy, "What's yours?"

"Bottle of Pearl," he said glancing at the back bar mirror to see who else was in the place. He was startled to see his eyes were locked with a pair of familiar ones. The man that middle-aged Bernice was flirting with was Larry Thorpe. Thorpe had looked beyond her and into the back bar mirror to see who the new person was. His glance caught Roy's.

Flustered, Roy let his gaze slither all over the place. A second later, still in a flutter, he careened his head to look passed the two intervening drinkers only to find that Thorpe had done exactly the same thing. For the second time Roy's dark eyes were staring into Larry's pale blue ones.

This wouldn't do. Grover had made up his mind to give

Larry the cold shoulder until the handsome man came around begging to get re-acquainted.

"You gonna pay for this?"

It was "Mr. Bernice" with the Pearl and demanding to be paid. Roy dropped his dime on the floor. The bit of metal rolled as though bewitched all the way across the tiles, between the feet of four people sitting in a booth and disappeared into a dilly lit nothing. It was embarrassing trying to find it. None of the seated four wanted to move. Bernice asked "What happened?" Larry silently watched Roy's floundering to get the coin. Grover ended up paying with another dime. He did not enjoy the beer especially since he could not dare to glance up to the back bar mirror. He might again lock eyes with Thorpe, and under no conditions must he show any more interest in that man. He had shown too much already.

Next morning Roy saw him again. His eight o'clock class was a course in Ernech, and he had formed the habit of getting there early. Ten or fifteen minutes of sitting quietly in the class room before the other students showed up gave him time to run over the irregular conjugations as well as gather his random thoughts. So the next morning he was passing by Bernice's a quarter of an hour before the big rush to the eight o'clocks began. When the proprietors slept was a mystery because they always had a hot breakfast ready for serving by seven o'clock. Mechanically, Roy looked through the steamed plate glass windows. Thorpe was again seated at the counter, this time at the end stool where you could not miss seeing him. Was it by accident that he glanced through the front windows just as Roy looked

in, or had he been scanning the sidewalk with stroboscopic blinks for a chance to lock eyes with Grover again?

Roy did not feel he had lost face by being caught twice in a row looking at Thorpe. Thorpe had done the same thing to him. Maybe it was time to go it playing hard to get. There was good reason to think that Larry had come all the way out to the University District just to stalk him. Why else would an armored car driver be hanging around that neighborhood? No banks were there, certainly none that opened its doors at ten-thirty at night nor seven-thirty in the morning. If Thorpe was putting in eight hours a day at his job, then these early morning and late evening appearances meant he was sacrificing a lot of spare time just to run across Roy. That was almost the same thing as begging. There was no need to snub him any longer. The world was looking so rosy Roy could not conjugate a single French verb in class.

But that night after rehearsals the tall man was no where to be seen, nor did he make an appearance the next morning. He wasn't around Thursday either, and Roy began to spend time trying to figure out why. One very logical explanation kept pestering his mind. Maybe Thorpe was seen in the area because his wife worked here and not because he was going to great lengths to see the kid he seduced a year ago. This gnawing thought erased the rosy coloring from his life.

Friday morning he decided to find out for sure. If Larry was driving his wife to work--maybe the Model A had conked out--he could spot them at the starting hour. He remembered Mrs. Thorpe had to be at the nursing home at some ungodly hour in

the morning, so he set his alarm for five.

When it went off it awakened his roommate as well as he himself. The thick faced fellow raised up in bed at the sound, and made throaty noises as though he were having a nightmare. Then he flopped back on his pillow, and, even though the night was hot, he covered up his head with a bed sheet. Roy dressed carefully to keep from waking him again. Eager to start his vigil he left off shaving and brushing his teeth. Those unnecessaryes could be done when he got back and really arose. The stairs creaked when he tip-toed down them. No one at all was up. The night latch still held the front door. It scraped when he opened it.

Outside the dawn had progressed only as far as a faint rose color in the east. Daylight seemed to be having trouble breaking through heavy clouds. The air was sultry. Any minute a thunder storm could turn loose a down pour. He must not let a few raindrops scare him off. Perhaps he should go back for a raincoat, but there was no time for that. If Thorpe was driving his wife to work in their big Ford he would spend only a few seconds letting her off in front of the nursing home, then he would drive to some side street, park, and kill time in what ever night spot would be open at that hour. So if Grover wanted to find out if Thorpe's presence meant only he was playing chauffeur to his wife he would have to be watching during the few seconds they stopped at the curb.

A big warm rain drop hit him as he turned into Vaca street. By the time he was in view of the nursing home two more had fallen on him and a wind had sprung up. He searched the street

for a shelter. Vaca was not really built up as a business district. Only here and there an isolated store had rooted out the barn-like boarding houses. No where was there an overhead, sidewalk awning. One bookstore had a recessed entrance, but from there he would not have a clear view of the nursing home. If a shower should start in earnest he had only one choice, to take refuge on the front porch of one of the boarding houses. Old folks sometimes did this, but it usually caused someone inside to raise a window and call out if everything was all right. Rain did begin to fall in earnest, and Roy made for a long, yellow stucco rooming house across the street from the nursing home. He was about to dash up to its front porch when a car, its windshield wipers screeching on nearly dry glass, turned a corner and stopped in front of the home's iron gate.

Roy had his answer. It was the black Ford. Thorpe, easily recognizable with his bushy beard, was driving. With professional smoothness he brought the car to a stop, then leaned across the front seat and kissed his wife good-bye. Georgia stepped to the curb and pulled a silk handkerchief over her head to protect her freshly curled hair from the rain and hurried through the nursing home's front gate. Thorpe drove off without glancing to the other side of the street where Roy, standing with his mouth open, was getting wetter and wetter.

Grover caught the worst of the flash shower and was soaked by the time he got back to his room. His shirt was too wet to re-hang in the closet. If he laid it on the back of his chair the dampness might split the cheap veneer. In a pout he dropped both shirt and trousers on the floor and crawled back in bed. Fortunately his roommate did not awaken. Perhaps he would forget

about the five o'clock alarm and would not know that Roy had made a fool of himself.

Friday night's rehearsal called for blocking out the stage movement for the third act of "Rose". Miss Sorenson liked to follow her schedule closely, and she had hoped to have the routine chore of fixing stage movements finished in five days so that Saturday and Sunday the cast could get down to more important things such as character interpretation, mood and pace. But no more than thirty minutes of Friday's rehearsal had gone by before Dol came out from her back row seat in the auditorium and tapped Miss Sorenson on the shoulder. The actors had to suspend work while the two women whispered together. Finally, Miss Sorenson blinked her eyes twice then nodded her head in agreement.

"Cast," she said as she turned to the performers, "an exciting challenge has just come up--"

Those who knew the Directress well smiled slightly. They were used to her well-bred way of describing the most awful ball-up in euphemistic terms. The announcement of a "challenge" probably meant they were in for something irksome.

"--Often on the professional stage an actor has to adapt to last minute changes. When you're working with a brand new script you may even have a line change on opening night. Now, Miss Abbol has been watching this very scene we're working on. She thinks it's not right. She wants to go home, make some revisions and have them typed out for the cast by tomorrow's rehearsal. I agree with her completely.

"It means we'll have to drop act three and go back to act



two tonight. Then Saturday night Miss Abbel will have the new act three ready. Here we go back to the last scene of act two. Ready every one?"

Saturday morning Mr. McKay posted an announcement on the departmental bulletin board that the evening rehearsals would begin at six-thirty instead of seven. He added a note that the dean of women had given permission for the "ladies" in the cast to remain away from their dormitories for as late as twelve o'clock, midnight.

For the girls this extension of time was slightly daring. Drama majors were probably the only women attending the University who were ever granted this special permission. It seemed to key up the whole cast, boys and girls alike.

Each one seemed eager to pitch-in and show he was especially "adaptable" when he arrived at six-thirty. Miss Sorenson calmly announced what they would try to accomplish during the long forth coming practice--block out the movement of the new third act then do a run-through from memory of the opening scene of the play--in other words two rehearsals in one. None of the students needed to be told that everyone would have to be especially cooperative. It meant each one would have to be ready for his entrances and would have to stay quietly out of the way during the long periods when he would not be on stage.

To make sure everything went smoothly Mr. McKay himself showed up for the long Saturday night marathon. His being there was a nice gesture, but it was really unnecessary. From the beginning Miss Sorenson kept everything well under control. She had a knack for inspiring dedication. For her drama was

such a serious thing it was almost a religion. Waste of time was a sacrilege. Her attitude was catching, and everyone did his best.

At first they were furnished with almost entirely new scripts for the third act, but that was not the end of the changes. They had hardly got started before Dol limped down from her back row seat and whispered in Mr. McKay's ear. It was interesting that because Mr. McKay was there she chose to speak to him instead of directly to Miss Sorenson. Mr. McKay frowned and fidgeted then said, "Well, tell her your self."

The authoress limped over two steps and whispered in the directress's ear. Miss Sorenson listened for a moment then called, "Cut. We have a line change. Olive, instead of saying 'Thank God we're alive,' say 'Look the rose has a bud on it'."

Dol went toward the back of the auditorium but took a seat in the middle rows instead of the far back. It wasn't five minutes before she was up front whispering into McKay's ear. He listened a moment then impatiently waved her on toward Miss Sorenson. Dol had another little line change.

Her interruptions became more frequent, and the rehearsals would have fallen apart if Miss Sorenson hadn't started frowning slightly every time the authoress left her seat. By nine o'clock Dol was subdued enough to remain in her place and merely take notes. It looked like they might get through the whole double rehearsal as scheduled.

By ten o'clock they managed to get act three blocked out, and Miss Sorenson immediately called for the cast of act one to get in position. The play opened with two two cockney scullery

maids announcing that "Lady Vanessa" never went to an air raid shelter during a blackout because she couldn't stand the thought of hiding while her fiance, "Nigel", was out fighting the Jerries. So neither Clive (Lady Vanessa) nor Roy (Nigel) would be on stage for a few minutes.

Both Roy and Clive did their best to spend the idle time concentrating. Clive leaned against a heavy flat and covered her face with her hands to shut out the world. Roy began pacing back and forth with his eyes closed, but it was not five minutes before both of them became restive. They had been working for over three hours and needed a break. Clive said as much and took Roy by the arm and led him outside to the loading platform. There they dangled their feet over the edge and looked out into the night.

"What do you think of the crisis?" said Clive.

Roy wasn't sure he knew what she was talking about. As far as he knew the fighting in the South Pacific had not changed in intensity enough to be called a crisis. 1942 was not an important election year. It took him a moment to realize she was ~~chattering~~ <sup>gossiping</sup> about some write-ups that the student newspaper had been carrying for the last three or four days, something about the president of the University meeting in an emergency conference with the board of regents. Most of the write-ups were too deep for Roy. He was only vaguely aware that the University had both a president and a board of regents. Clive, he thought, was too much the club woman type. She would be more fun if she talked about frivolous things instead of taking a responsible stand on current events.

"Schein hasn't got as much on his side as the monarch is

letting on for," she said. A certain tone to her voice warned that she was wound up to go on at length about Dr. Schein, the University president, and whatever muddle he was in. Roy suspected she did not have as much inside information as her authoritative statements indicated. He almost wished he were black pacing the floor concentrating

"Schein's got four higher degrees, but both the LL.D. and the D.Sc. are honorary," she continued. "He's also mixed up with the Fabian Society. You didn't even know there was a Fabian Society in this country, did you? Well, their influence is here. You can be sure of that."

Roy kept his mouth shut. He had never heard of any Fabian society, much less of the secret tentacles of one in this country. Clive did not need encouragement to go on.

"Oh, I'm on Schein's side," she said. The Monarch is right. It would be at least a mild catastrophe if he were fired. But we must look at the crisis objectively."

She dropped the wired "fired" as though this were a little bomb. The urgency of her voice caused Roy to pick up a spark of interest even though it all sounded like a tempest in a tea pot.

"If they fire him the Navy training programs may be stopped. That means all the boys who have put in for delayed entry courses will be pushed right into a boot camp. Roy, I suppose you've signed up for the V-five's or the V-seven's, haven't you?"

"No."

"Oh, you should think it over. Some of the boys will get to put in a whole year before they're sent overseas. You know what will happen to you if you don't volunteer for a training program. Eight weeks' training then the Pacific."

She was an alarmist. And like many smart students who knew too much her facts were wrong. The Navy's plan for training officers in college was determined in Washington. The local University president, whoever he was, couldn't have a thing to do with it.

He began to squirm. The platform was extremely uncomfortable. A peek over his shoulder revealed the two cockneys were not through speaking their lines. He would have to sit here and listen to Olive a while longer.

The service was something he didn't want to think about. Surely Olive could tell that he was still too young to be drafted. It was true they had lowered the induction age to nineteen and were hinting at registering eighteen year olds. But he was only seventeen. Couldn't Olive see he was just a kid? They couldn't possibly suck him into anything before his birthday in July.

July. They were now well into April. May, June, July. Three months. Again he looked uneasily over his shoulder to see if it was time to go on stage. It was not.

Olive seemed to sense his uneasiness, and she changed the subject. "You've heard about the rest home, haven't you?"

"Rest home? What rest home?"

"You know that old folks place over on Vaca Street. They're moving everything out. Government taking over. Very secret, very hush-hush war time work going in. They're planning to move the old folks out and extend the brick wall all around so no one can see what goes on inside. Not enough building materials to start from scratch. They have to requisition what's already here--"

Couldn't Olive bring up something besides bad news? The rest home going out? Yesterday morning the place might have been a source of disappointment to him, but a second's reflection today told him if the home went so went his one close connection with Larry Thorpe.

"I've got to go concentrate," he said.

"Certainly," said Olive rising up from the platform. "We're almost on."

When it came their turn on stage they hardly got started before Miss Sorenson called, "Cut". It was Dol, again whispering to Mr. McKay who was crossing and uncrossing his legs nervously.

"I thought it was only the third act you were going to butcher up," he said. "The first one sounds all right to me."

Miss Sorenson raised her hand and said, "Dol is quite within her rights. Let's make the change before we go any further. 'You're pulling my leg' is not British. Neither is 'twisting my leg'. Olive, Miss Abbol wants the line to read, 'Stop it. Let's be serious'. Now then let's go on."

But they did not go far before Miss Abbol was back with a handful of tightly scribbled notes. McKay blew out his breath before she got to him, got up from his chair and rudely walked out on the loading platform. Miss Sorenson calmly called, "Cut", and cocked her head to one side to invite Dol to tell her the suggestion. This time the actors were given four entirely new lines to be inserted right after Lady Vanessa expressed her surprise at seeing her fiance.

McKay, still puffing heavy breaths, returned and announced

that he would go call the dean of women. "Midnight won't even see us started. I'll have to ask that old gal to let her chickens stay away from the roost until dawn. We'd better have a car load of hamburgers and a tanker full of coffee sent up too. We're facing a helluva rehearsal."

Miss Sorenson ignored his impatience and instructed her cast to procede.

As soon as he had phoned the dean McWay sent the script girl over to the drugstore to bring back paper cups of coffee for everyone. The treat was on him. When they took a break to sip it he announced that the dean had, for the first time ever, given permission for the girls to stay out until one o'clock. Such a big favor made its impression. As soon as the coffee was down the cast went back to work even harder. If such exceptions were to be made for them they would prove it was not a wasted gesture. Even Dol was impressed, and she interrupted only three more times.

Finally it was Roy's time to be off-stage, and it would be ten minutes performing time before he would reappear which meant thirty or forty minutes rehearsal time. He withdrew to one corner of the wings and tried concentrating but found it impossible to keep his eyes closed and even pretend to be clearing his mind. Olive's gossip had left him uneasy.

So, he was not worrying about the "crisis". He would leave that to students who liked to pretend they were "in the know". But there was that about the rest home going. And one of these days he was going to have to think about the draft.

He gave up trying to concentrate and walked out on the

loading platform. The night was sultry. But even sultry air felt fresh. But fresh air or not Roy began to have an attack of jitters.

The way news was spoon fed to the public disgusted him. Didn't it disgust other people too? Why didn't they tell each other they were disgusted?

Only six months ago newspapers were filled with columns of copy saying we would never fight another foreign war. And in those far off days only twenty-one to twenty-five year olds were being drafted. Then Pearl Harbor came. They told the public nineteen year olds would have to register, "just in case". Now nineteen to forty-five year olds were going in, and they were warning that fathers had better stand by, "just in case". Supposedly responsible people were vowing the government would never draft eighteen year olds, but right now politicians were preparing the draft boards to register them, "just in case". Who could believe those "responsible" people. Certainly not fathers nor eighteen year olds.

But he must not let his mind sink into these pools of resentment. Right now in the Pacific men not much older than he were laying down their lives to protect him. That thought always came back to you when you felt like telling the draft board to go to hell.

Someone was coming out on the platform. Why, it was Mr. McRay. The departmental head walked to the edge of the loading ramp and found a place to stand some ten feet away from Roy. At that distance he was neither avoiding the student nor getting familiarly close. He stood so close to the edge that the toes of his highly polished shoes cantilevered three inches out into



the air. Perhaps he was trying to prove that precipices didn't bother him, or perhaps he was just trying to show off. After a few seconds of scanning the blackness of the night he noticed Roy. Or had he noticed him immediately and only now pretended to do so?

"Concentrating?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Roy. There was no reason to confess his jitters.

"Oh, I'm sorry to disturb you," said McKay. Then he tilted back on his heels as though next he would rock forward on his projecting toes. Grover gasped at what was about to happen. But McKay's sense of balance was so acute he was able to teeter on the balls of his feet without tipping off the edge. There he rocked for a few moments a hair away from dropping six feet down into a hedge. Roy decided he was showing off.

Then the man started doing something else strange. First, he got his hands on his hips in a very special way. Then with a single movement he lowered himself down on the edge of the platform until he was sitting with his legs crossed under him. Most of his sitter and almost all of his folded legs projected out into the air.

Why, Roy had seen this pose before. The head of the department was seated like a statue of Buddha, except that he was not dead still. He was breathing in a funny way.

The man was doing yoga exercises. Roy gasped. Only half cracked nuts went in for yoga. How had a screw-loose like that ended up the head of a department? There could be only one answer. The draft had taken all the level headed ones and he represented

the scrape from the bottom of the barrel. Was he married? If he weren't how did he stay out of the army? Anyone who could do yoga like that must be physically fit.

McKay took five deep breaths then rose up on his right leg while keeping the left extended at a sharp ninety degree angle. After five more breaths he gracefully settled back into his Buddha pose. Such muscular control made Roy gasp again. The departmental head pretended not to hear him. In a moment he raised his hands to his chest, rubbed himself vigorously and stood up. He took a step backwards for safety and said, "There. That blew off some of my temper. I'd had about all of those feuding females I could stand. Beautiful night, isn't it?"

Such unconventional goings-on. Admitting he had a temper, calling his comrades in the teaching profession "feuding females", asking a mere student if the night was beautiful.

"Well, yes," said Roy. What else could you say to someone who had broken all the rules?

McKay was off on to some more exercises. With his hands thrust back behind his shoulderblades he rolled his head rag-doll fashion from right to left. As he did so the blue street light which cast such an artistic glow on the clump of bushes behind the auditorium glistened in the whites of his eyes. He squinted.

"Those fucking street lights. They ruin any real moonlight we might have. Cheap looking, aren't they?"

Roy gasped again. That word. A professor of high standing ripping out the limit in vulgarity. And everyone knew campuses must be lit up.

"S--but, Sir. How would the girls get home from the library nights if the lights weren't there?"

McKay snorted. "They might feel their way. Don't worry about the gals."

If this man were anything but a Faculty member Roy would say he was now flirting. All these "let your hair down" declarations were what you suggested when you were on the make. He could not help but remember that it was on the other side of those blue tinted bushes that he had picked up "John". He also had to admit he agreed with a lot the professor was saying--the blue lights really were silly, Dol Abbot was certainly ridiculous, Miss Sorenson was a slave driver, and yoga was better than counting ten to get rid of your temper.

Roy studied the man more closely. In the past he had not cared much for McKay. He was a fish out of water. Down here in Texas he walked with the ram-rod posture of an English butler. He even tilted his head back and looked down his nose.

Yet, he was good looking. Many of the girls had said so. He also had vitality. And everyone knew he was soft-hearted to a fault. If only he didn't show up so phoney. He seemed to live in a world of tuxedos and Egyptian cigarettes. Never did he relax his overly correct stage diction. Even when he had uttered the phrase about the "fucking street lights" he rattled out every syllable with clipped, staccato rhythm.

But still it was a relief to see him with his hair down. Maybe even English butlers are human when they take off their clothes. Did Roy dare warm up to him?

"They are getting their money out," said McKay.

Money out? What did he mean? ..

The professor had turned his head so he was looking, not at the blue grove, but over into one of the few dark pockets of the campus. This was at right angles to the auditorium and in the direction of the back door of the "ad" building. No street lights lit this little used corner of the campus, only lone bulbs over each of the two entrances.

Obviously this fellow liked the surprise effect of changing the subject quickly. The technique did, indeed, keep Roy interested in him. Obediently, he tried to connect up the man's guess with what he was saying. McKay helped him out by pointing into the shadowy area.

"There. By the comptroller's office. Silly custom. They might as well have the guards back their truck up in the day time as far as I can see. Everybody knows universities take in money. Everybody knows they have to get it to a bank. Would it disillusion the smooth cheeked youths too much if they saw money bags being carted off in the day time? You'd never seen them loading up their rubles before, had you? Such are the things you run across when you turn up a few minutes off schedule."

McKay dramatized his speech by pointing. No, he did not merely wiggle his finger into the darkness, but struck a pose much like the mariner pointing to the great beyond in the Lillais painting, The Boyhood of Sir Walter Raleigh. This dramatist knew how to captivate his audience and hold it.

Something really was taking place at the administration building. A silver Larasworth truck was backed up to the west side door. When Roy's eyes became better adjusted he made out two men standing on either side of the entrance. One of them

was quite tall.

Larry Thorpe had appeared once more into his life. Some way, some how this man continued to cross his path.

"One of those fellows is a tall son of a bitch, isn't he?" said McKay. "I spotted him the other day at a downtown bank. I wonder why the army hasn't got him."

The professor paused a moment in his beautifully declaimed speculations. A night watchman swung his billy club as he walked passed the artificially lighted bushes. He wasn't the same stocky giant who had guarded the auditorium last fall but was someone older, close to retirement, with a ponderous gait.

"Well, that's that," said McKay breaking the silence. It sounds like you're about on stage--if the script is still in the same order it once was. Sorry to set your mind wool-gathering when you should have been concentrating. A bad example for a professor to set. Inexcusable." He was about to go off and leave Roy when he turned and asked, "Do you really get much out of that stuff? The concentration exercise I mean?"

Would this man ever stop inviting confidences? Impulsively, Roy giggled and said, "No. I think most of it is crazy."

McKay smiled slightly while he gave the pupil a close look. Abruptly he turned and left.

The nerve of the man walking off just when Roy had decided to open up and speak his true mind. He really didn't get anything from concentrating. It was deep-end mumbo-jumbo as far as he was concerned. And if McKay had hung around any longer he would have told him yoga was worse than that. He would have asked him why the army hadn't snapped him up along with Larry

Thorpe. He would have told him that phrases like "fucking lights" and "son of a bitch" had not set his mind wool gathering but had caused a different sensation lower down in his body. In short he would have flirted right back with Roy. He was sure that was what the professor was doing. But that odd-ball had led him on then dropped him flat. Games. Everybody liked to play games.

The script girl was signalling anxiously toward him. In another couple of lines--if they stayed in their present condition--Roy would be on stage. He forced himself to get "in character" and walked back to the stage ready for his entrance cue.

Monday turned out to be a red-letter day. Roy did not meet Thorpe at Bernice's or any where else. In stead, the crisis, the one Olive had been so concerned about, broke. Schein was fired. The student's Daily Monarch carried two inch headlines saying "Schein Booted Out". The city's two morning newspapers pushed the war news off to left hand columns and gave the Schein story top heading. "Board of Regents in Schein Custer", said the Republic, and the Bulletin read, "Bales Axes Schein".

Who was Bales? Roy didn't know. For several months he had refused to read the newspapers. Every paragraph, even the comic strips and the want ads, managed some way to mention the war. The radio had half hour news casts, and in between the popular singers, the preachers, the expert analysts, all soaked their verbiage with references to the war. Roy couldn't understand why the public didn't get sick of it. Never once were you given a moment to relax, to stop and think over what was going on. Disaster followed disaster, and each one demanded

an immediate sacrifice.

The crisis was something different. He bought the Bulletin, and at the edge of the campus someone passed out to him a free copy of the Louise. He learned that Bales was one of the university's regents and that he owned a ranch near Gillis, Texas. Schein, he discovered, had consulted legal advisors from Harvard and would fight the dismissal.

Schein and Bales. These men meant almost nothing to him. He wasn't sure what a board of regents was. Of course he knew that all universities had presidents, and he had often heard that Dr. Schein was supposed to be an especially good one. "A leading educator" was a phrase he picked up from some where. "The South is lucky to have him," he had heard or read some where else.

Roy had even seen Dr. Schein. Some how he had it in his mind that you could run into this famous man quite easily on the campus. The first day of the orientation ceremonies last fall he had addressed the in-coming freshman class. On the stage he had looked good, a large man with a frank, open face and one of the widest smiles Roy had seen. It was almost as enchanting as Larry Thorpe's dimples. You got the impression that he would willingly stop and talk with a student if you ran across him in your campus walks.

A second time he had seen Schein. It was right after war was declared. A British lord visited the campus. Dr. Schein introduced him to a gathering of some five thousand. The two men spoke in the fountain plaza in front of the library. Again Schein was so likeable, broad shouldered, dark, curly

hair, a woolly bear type. But so many public figures were like-able that one was tempted to suspect affability as a pose. All of Roy's school superintendents had shown up well when they walked down the street. But every one of them had been good at winning unruly boys, occasionally some that weren't so unruly. Was a college president much different from a highschool superintendent? Did it really matter who ran the university?

Schein, himself, might not be as nice as he looked on the rostrum. Come to think of it the two speeches were the only times he could remember seeing the man. On the platform he had given the impression of having close contact with the students. But Roy must have jumped to that conclusion with no basis of fact. If the president had ever used the campus sidewalks Grover had not seen him do it. How did you get to Schein's office? All Roy knew was that it was suspiciously elaborate. When you went up to the top floor of the library you could look out and see the roof of the administration building. There you learned the Ad building's parapet of decorative Grecian urns doubled as a railing surrounding a pent house and roof garden. Some one had told him this pent house, complete with awnings, geranium window boxes and coach lights was Schein's office. Over in the Administration building the elevator stopped at the fourth floor. So did the stairs. Roy had no idea how you got on up to the pent house. It might be hard to get to the core of facts surrounding Dr. Schein.

But Roy would not let his mind travel far along these thoughts. It was foolish to be cynical, and upper level administration problems did not concern a freshman drama major. In



fact, he would like to work in an office just like that. The luxurious life was fine if you could get it.

If Roy had been secretly dreaming of a diversion from war news he now had it. Even at seven-forty-five in the morning the crisis had the students out and stirring. As soon as you stepped on the campus you found yourself in a super charged atmosphere. At least three gangs of students were out staking up hastily printed signs. "Big Rally at one-thirty" was the most frequent one. Other posters said, "The boys in the Pacific aren't taking it lying down. Let's not shirk our duty either", and "Hit the beach head at one-thirty". Each of the oaks in the row of trees leading to the library had slogans taped to their trunks--"Don't let Bales bale us," and "When Schein is gone there's no sunshine for us either". One brave sign said, "Strike--it's the only right we've got left."

Almost every student was stopping to read the signs. More than a few were gathering in knots to talk it over. Some journalism majors were passing out the morning edition of the student paper. It usually cost a nickel, but this morning it was free. Two girls, soberly dressed types, were pressing handbills on anyone who would take them. They urged you to be at the men's gymnasium at one-thirty.

The excitement also affected Roy. It looked like the students were going to do something. That word, "Strike" was tantalizingly daring for Texas. What an effect it would have on parents. It looked like here was a chance to blow off steam.

In between classes he read the Monarch's lurid stories about Bales. Bales had become the special target of the paper's

editor, a senior journalism major named Carl Carpenter. Roy had seen Carpenter around, a quiet, polite fellow. But his theatrical reviews were acid. Bales, he said, was trying to shovel manure in Fort Boomer when he should be cleaning out his own loading yards in Gillis. He was banning books from the University library because they mentioned the word, "toilet". The fact was none of his thirty cowhands ever had access to any kind of toilet on his ranch, not even a privy. They had to squat behind mesquite bushes. Bales accused Schein of conspiring with pink-oes while every one in Gillis knew their most famous rancher was a master at laying traps to merge banks and foreclose mortgages. Bales had stated no daughter of his would ever read a single one of the novels studied in Modern Literature number 301. That might be because neither of them knew how. Both of them had married rich husbands as soon as they finished mediocre highschool careers.

By ten o'clock the posters on the campus lawns had sprouted up twice as thick. A new name had appeared on them--Tom Jessup.

Tom Jessup was the student body president who had won his office in last October's election. Tom had campaigned as an ex-marine who knew how to get things done. The ex-marine part had a fascinating, down-to-earth explanation. When fresh out of highschool he had joined the marines. After two years of it a hand grenade accident had invalidated him out and forced him back into the studious life. By the time he was a sophomore he had gained enough popularity to become student body president.

Roy, as well as everyone else, had seen Jessup around. Tom was as outgoing as Carpenter was reserved. If you arose to any prominence at all on the campus Jessup hunted you up,

shook your hand and congratulated you. Roy had one a congratulation after his first walk-on last fall.

The ten o'clock crop of signs carried Jessup's personal endorsement. "Tom wants to talk to you at one-thirty", and "Together with Tom we'll get Schein shining again." Roy couldn't help but be fascinated. He liked Jessup. Anyone could see he was as glib as a traveling salesman, but you felt that was only his way of putting his sincerity across. The one-thirty meeting ought to be interesting, but there was a serious complication. The cast of "A Rose Grows on the White Cliffs of Dover" was scheduled to have its publicity pictures taken at that hour. Of course no trooper would ever let a mere political meeting interfere with his theatrical life. Roy was afraid he would have to miss Jessup's stirring address.

But at eleven o'clock there was an announcement tacked up on the drama department's bulletin board. Mister McKay ordered all the cast to meet at the turn-around on the south side of the Auditorium at ten after twelve. He also advised you to pass the word around to those who might not have a chance to read the bulletin board. Roy sighed. That was just like McKay to give only an hour and ten minutes' notice to be at an important meeting.

Everyone including Miss Sorenson and Dol were there at ten after twelve. The sun roasted them in the shadowless world of high noon. McKay, prancing impatiently on the hot flagstones, was wearing a new seer-sucker suit, a straw hat, and--of all things--a pence-nez. He kept clapping his hands and asking the crowd to please be quiet. "Attention. Quiet. Attention

please." The group turned out to be slow to respond, so he started calling names, "you Merle, George, you Olive. Quiet please." He skipped Roy. For some reason the man who had been so familiar on the loading platform completely ignored him two days later. Finally, all were quiet except Dol. She persisted in talking, too loud for the most insistent prompter, in a stage whisper to the script girl.

"--In the theater," she rasped, "you keep appointments. You don't whine your way out of them. You let him put off this afternoon's photography and he'll find a way to pull out of tonight's rehearsal. How can I get a script in performing order with slipshod schedules? What's this student meeting for? Who is this man Schein?"

McKay started his speech with lung power that drowned her out. "Cast, we faculty members want you to know that we're backing the students. We're backing you all the way. Isn't that right, Miss Sorenson?"

Miss Sorenson, wearing a wide brimmed straw hat with a white lace trim, had been standing quietly at the edge of the group. Several times she had given Dol dirty looks for holding up the meeting with her whispers. Now that the authoress was drowned out she calmly agreed with McKay. "Yes," she said. "All the faculty members are with you and the students." Everyone could see her statement excluded Dol Abbot.

"But all of us know," said McKay, "that actors have another loyalty. The show must go on. Rehearsals must go on. And when you have an appointment with the best photographer in town, then photography must go on."

These words were so unnecessary that they were slightly

puzzling. Roy, as well as all the other students, knew protest meetings were no where near the category of sickness or death. Even if this uproar should blossom into something called a "strike" theatrical activities would certainly go right on. After all, drama majors liked to act. What would they gain by skipping a rehearsal?

None of them had taken Dol's mutterings about a postponement seriously, the words of an alarmist. But it seemed Dol had actually assumed the authority of making such a change. He said that by begging Thelma, down at Dorf's, he had managed to re-schedule the photography sittings for an hour later.

"Last, that means you'll have to be here at the turn-around, in costume, by two-fifteen. Has everyone got that? No matter what happens, no matter what you have to walk out of, be here, ready to pose for a picture, at a quarter after two."

If this surprised the students his next statement surprised them more. "Maybe I'm jumping the gun," McKay said pushing his straw hat back and wiping his brow, "maybe I shouldn't bring this up at this time, it's a hot day to get hot and bothered in--"

Roy wondered why he didn't just say what was on his mind instead of apologizing. But when the professor asked them about cancelling rehearsals in case Jessup called a strike he thought the man ought to be ashamed of himself. (Of course no one wanted to give up rehearsals.

"--Well, what do you think of it? I think we ought to let the students themselves decide. So I'm going to ask for a vote. Now this is just the cast. All the faculty members and authoresses keep keep out of this. How many vote to rehearse tonight re-

ardless of what come up? Let's see your hands."

Regardless of what comes up? What did the man mean? Where was he raised that he would let a strike cancel a rehearsal? Everyone knew there were strikes and strikes. Pupils walking out of classes wasn't the same thing as automobile workers not bolting more parts together. Classes did not produce anything tangible. Just who would be hurt in case the students followed Jessup into mass class cutting was unclear. But who would be hurt if their play didn't come off was plain. The performers would be.

Dol spoke up before anyone had a chance to raise his hand. "I have a contract with the university," she announced. "It stipulates solid rehearsals over a four week period. I'm afraid I'll have to find redress if it's cancelled. My contract also calls for me to make revisions, and I have more revisions to try out. We cannot stop rehearsals. No one stops a theatrical production for trivial reasons."

McKay broke in. He also stepped out of character when he did so. His polished diction lost some of its clip. "Keep your shirt on, Sister," he said. "We're asking the kids what they want to do."

"Well, I'm speaking up before it's too late. Haven't you got any spirit of the theater down here? You, yourself, have been some where else. You know better. Can't you set a good example for the 'kids' as you call them? How will they ever make it in the theater if they aren't willing to devote every moment of their lives to it, no matter what comes along?"

"I said, 'Let's ask them'", said McKay.

"They should be told they can't stop out. You should never

have mentioned the matter."

McKay spread his hands as if to cut off her words. "Let's vote, Kids."

They voted, and the results surprised no one but McKay. All hands went up in favor of rehearsals. Dol switched her cone from her right fist to her left and muttered, "Thank God." McKay dismissed the group with a, "Thank you. Thank you. See you at a quarter after two."

When McKay called the twelve-fifteen meeting he must have known that those who ate at boarding houses would certainly miss the first serving and would have to rush to get the left-overs on the second. However, missed meals were also a part of an actor's life. Roy was not surprised when Olive signaled to him. She was into a scheme that would knock him completely out of lunch. Olive had George Watt, an art major who dabbled in dramatics, by the hand.

"Roy," she said. "you've got to help us stake up posters. George has been drawing like mad all morning, and his cartoons will make all the other signs look sick. Come on."

So for the next hour Roy, Olive and George added to the many political signs that cluttered the campus lawns. They barely had time to wash up and head for the meeting in the men's gymnasium. The threesome was broken up at the steps to the mezzanine seats when George and Olive stopped to acknowledge some compliments about his clever sign work. The crowd in the gymnasium corridors was peaking toward its most congested thickness, and it looked like the artist and his lady patron would require several minutes to absorb the praise. Eager to get a good seat Roy broke away from them and began nudging his way towards the entrance chutes to

the balcony. The going was frustrating. Hips, shoulders and elbows were so thick he could hardly tell if he were going up or down much less if the crowd he was being funnelled into would have a vacancy.

Someone placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled. Tactically contact was inevitable in this near stampede, and he would have ignored it if the fingers hadn't dug in with such strong clinching power.

"Grover. Roy. Mr. Grover."

The voice that called him was oddly soft for such a hub-bub. But Roy recognized it. Marion Tolliver, who for months had kept himself so remote that the two had hardly nodded to each other, was wanting to speak to him here in this crowd.

Roy, in spite of many pressures to keep moving, managed to turn and look at him. Of course in such hot weather Grover had not expected to see the man dressed in a fancy coat, but he was surprised to see that he wasn't shaved, that his hair needed cutting, and his white shirt was as wrinkled and soiled as though he had been sleeping in it.

"Well?" said Tolliver as soon as they managed to get to one side of the swell of traffic. Roy did not understand. Tolliver's "well" suggested Grover should already know what was on his mind. He didn't.

"Did you get one?" said Tolliver, his eyes wide with excitement. When Roy told him he had no idea what he meant the tall fellow showed him a postal card which he had creased into four tight folds so that it almost formed a ball in his sweaty palm. Roy managed to unfold it even though he was constantly



Joseph. It was addressed to Holliver and was from the dean of men's office. Rugger's own signature was at the bottom, and the body of the note said, "This office has made an appointment with you for one-thirty pm, this Monday. You must consider this notice as an official summons to be there at that time. Failure to do so will result in strict disciplinary action."

Holliver again asked him if he had gotten one. When Roy said, no, Marion said in his soft breathy voice, "I thought you had. Mine came in the eleven o'clock mail. Two and half hours notice to be there. Imagine that, two and half hours notice. Drop everything. Be there. And you say you didn't get one? You've been home to get today's mail, haven't you?"

For a moment Roy could not answer. This was so surprising. Why did Holliver automatically suppose that Grover would get such a summons too? He was thinking this over when Marion said, "I can see you haven't been home. You know what it's about, don't you? Well, if you don't you'd better start guessing what it's about. How about lover's you've been sleeping with? Any blabber mouths? Maybe you'd better go home and read your mail instead of running up here to this fool meeting."

Automatically, Roy said, "That's not it. It can't be it. I'll bet I haven't got a post card." But while he said this he began to push his way against the in-coming traffic. With considerable effort he and Holliver found a vacant pocket at the bottom end to one side of the balcony chute where they could talk. The first thing he did was to point out to Marion that this meeting would take precedence over any appointments. All he need do was phone Rugger's office and explain that he was following

Jessup's summons and arrange for a different hour.

Tolliver's soft voice changed to a harsh laugh. "You think so, huh? Well, you don't know what's going on. Just call up and tell that fat-assed Rugger you're going to cancel him out, huh? For your information Rugger's in a bind. Schein's gone. So the dean's got to suck up to a whole new set of bosses. It's either clean house or go out with the new broom. A whole new show is moving into this place. You're wasting your time going to this meeting."

"What's all this to me?" said Roy. "If you've got an appointment with the dean, go to it. I'm going up to listen to Jessup."

Tolliver shifted uneasily on his feet. "So you haven't been to your house? So you don't know whether you've got a card or not?"

"I don't know anything about post cards," Roy said. He had decided it was time to be firm with this presumptuous man. Above all he must not let someone else's problems scare him into making a foolish confession. Tolliver did not know for sure Roy was homosexual. Under no conditions was he going to admit it. It was time to set him straight. "I have not gotten a post card. I know of no reason why I should get one. I don't know what you mean by lovers. I'm going to the balcony to listen to the speech."

Merion continued to fidget uneasily without saying anything. He seemed to realize he had made a mistake by blurting out his story so suddenly. He straightened up his shoulders to try to regain some dignity and said, "Maybe you're right.

Maybe the thing to do is enjoy life while you can. Ah, life. So you don't know anything about lovers. And your idea of enjoying life is to go to a hot stinking gymnasium and listen to a kid not much older than you are telling the university where to head in. Ah, yes, that is great. Telling someone where to head in."

"I'm going up to the balcony," said Roy. But before he turned to leave he asked when was the post card mailed. "If you got it this morning it must have been mailed at least Saturday. Probably Friday."

"It was mailed Sunday."

"You mean the dean's office mailed a letter on Sunday?"

For an answer Tolliver unfolded his card, whose creased edges were now getting sweaty, and showed him the post mark. The date was yesterday, a Sunday.

It was Roy's turn to fidget. He happened to notice that there was a telephone booth right behind him. He also looked at the wall clock hanging over the balcony chute. It was one-thirty. He felt a strong urge to shrug the whole problem off and go on up and try to find a space in the bleacher seats. The crowd had now thinned down to a few late stragglers all rushing to get settled some where before the gavel should fall and the meeting begin.

But the dean's office sending out a card on Sunday. It wasn't secretaries worked yesterday as well as the dean himself. Impulsively, he motioned toward the telephone booth and said, "Call them up. Find out what they'll say when you tell them you're at the meeting. Who knows? They might be real nice.

All their cards are worded strict like that, but if you tell them you're at the meeting--"

"I've already called them up," said Marion. "They told me to be there at one-thirty."

Roy again looked at the clock. "You mean you're going to be late any way?"

Tolliver changed his weight from one foot to the other. You could tell he didn't know what to do. "Late," he said. "What is time, any way?"

His indecision revolted Roy. "You'd better do something. I'm going up to the balcony. If you just stand here you'll miss the speech and the dean too." He started to leave, but realized that maybe he, himself, had been too quick to cut Tolliver short. After all, he hadn't found out for sure what this was about. How did Tolliver know that the summons would concern a lover? If he should get home and find a card waiting for him it might be nice to have heard every rumor that was flying around. If you had listened to all possible stories some of them might be the truth, and in a case like this knowledge would be very valuable.

"Are you going to the dean's office?" he asked.

Tolliver took a breath. "The truth is I've decided not to."

This worried Roy. That card was very definite. It meant for him to show up. "Why not?" he asked.

"I might hire a lawyer instead."

"Then you'd better go get one. Time's wasting. That card said you had to be there."

"Usually, I've already called up a lawyer. In fact three of them. The cheapest one wanted twenty-five dollars before he would agree to see me."

"Twenty-five?" asked Roy. When he was silent for a moment. If he had a card waiting for him at the boarding house--just in case--how could he possibly pay twenty-five dollars for a lawyer? There would be only one way, to telephone his dad and beg him to wire him some money. The telephone call would have to be placed collect. Collect calls and wired money were things his father could never understand much less why his own son would have a summons to the dean's office. Seconds passed by while he thought this over. Tolliver was asking him something.

"--In fact several calls since eleven this morning. All of them over a pay phone. I don't happen to have any change with me. I left my pipe at home. I haven't any cigarettes. You smoke don't you?"

"Smoke? Me? No."

"You couldn't loan me a quarter?"

"Certainly not. You'd better get to the dean's office. What--what was this about a lover?"

Tolliver snorted. "Someone's been blabbing. You haven't heard anything have you?"

"I told you I didn't know what you're talking about. No, I haven't heard anything."

Both started walking up the chute toward the balcony. The place was packed. All the risers in the balcony-mezzanine area were full. Even the aisles were rather dangerously congested. Some how the student body had gotten permission from

the athletic department to cover the big three court playing floor with folding chairs. This was a major suspension of rules, because everyone knew you must not enter on the mirror varnished playing floor with anything but stocking feet or tennis shoes. Now it was jammed with close rows of chairs and street dressed pupils.

The seven elected student body officers were already in place on the small stage at the south end of the court. Down front center stage was a speaker's dais and a microphone. A huge flag of the United States was on one side, an equally large Texas flag on the other. Marsha Cole, the leader of the Glee Club, was just stepping up to the microphone. Surprisingly, for the hot afternoon she was dressed in ~~an~~pooff-white evening gown and wore long white gloves. She lifted her hands signalling the vast audience to arise and began singing The Star Spangled Banner.

By the time the national anthem was over Roy and Marion had squeezed themselves to a fairly specious standing room spot under the elevated score board.

"You shouldn't be here," Roy whispered to Tolliver. "What are you going to do if the dean tries to--well, I don't know what. What can he do to you? Aren't you about to graduate?"

Tolliver regained his confidence on this point. "Oh, I'll graduate," he said. "I'm sure of that. They can't cancel four years' work just because someone cuts an appointment."

"What do you mean, 'they can't'? Will you have to hire a lawyer to make them do it?"

"Oh, I'm confident I'll graduate. Even if I don't finish

the semester, I'll make them give me a degree."

Roy was so puzzled at Tolliver's assertive confidence that he could hardly pay attention to Tom Jessup who had just advanced to the microphone. Merion could only be some kind of screw loose who had gotten himself into trouble by sheer lack of caution. All these hints about someone blabbing--a stock response to shift the blame when you have failed to use common sense. The boast that he would "force" the university to change its rules and grant him a degree whether he had finished a term or not--more non-sense from an impractical dreamer. No one has that kind of influence. And if he didn't have twenty-five dollars for a lawyer now how would he ever confront the authorities with forceful enough stand to twist an enormous favor from them?

Grover decided it was best to ask no more questions. Let Tolliver drown in his own folly. Folly was what he seemed hell-bent on committing. It seemed his reason--if reason at all he had--for coming to the meeting was to make fun of the proceedings. First, he muttered that Jessup was trying to copy Churchill in stage bearing. "Comic. Ludicrous. Look how he's standing two feet behind the lectern. Anyone can see who he's imitating."

"Oh," said Roy.

"I need a cigarette something awful," said Tolliver. "And this place is a fire trap. A hick town. Who cares whether you hear anything in a hick town or not? Who cares whether you get thrown out of a hick town or not? Throw me out? They'll have to grab fast or they'll have a hold of nothing but air stream back wash. I'm going to have to find a cigarette."

"Shh!" said Roy.

"I've also got to take a piss," said Tolliver out loud. The girl who was standing a foot in front of him stiffened her back. Roy gasped. "Yes, I said, 'piss'," Marion continued. What are you kids going to do about it, arrest me? You've got to get one of your cops all the way up to your shitty score board sign first. I'm going to hunt up a cigarette. Roy--Mr. Grover--will you allow me to part from your company while I hunt up a cigarette?"

The boy who was standing beside the girl turned around to stare at Tolliver. Roy was mortified. Tom Jessup's mechanically amplified voice was swelling out across the gymnasium. All the feet shuffling, all the whispering--except Tolliver's--had stopped. Jessup's deep tones had the crowd hanging on to his every syllable.

"--Freedom is threatened," he said. "Our God given freedom to inquire, to study, to think, to push back the clouds of ignorance and superstition, all are threatened. Our choice to reason and act as responsible, sapient members of the human race is threatened. We must not, we cannot sit on our hands, meekly turning our other cheeks, blinding our eyes, pretending that we have seen, heard, read, felt nothing--"

"A copy. Pure copy of Winston Churchill," said Tolliver. "I've got to have a cigarette."

"Shh!" said the boy standing in front of him.

"Don't shush me, kid," said Tolliver. "Give me a cigarette."

"--The elected officers of your student body, my colleagues, have decided we cannot sit on our hands--" Someone down in the varnished floor area started clapping. In a moment the



building resounded with a swell of applause and cheers. Tolliver said, "Damn, I've got to hunt up someone who'll loan me a cigarette. So long, Grover, my nodding acquaintance who was never a friend, so long. Maybe we'll meet behind bars." He began nudging his way through the crowd. It was difficult going, but by the time the cheers had died down Roy could see he was some ten rows down from the score board and was tapping a tall boy on the shoulder. The boy looked up, exchanged a whisper with Marion, then reached in his shirt pocket and came up with a package of Camels. Roy sighed with relief.

"--The honorable Mr. Bales, Mr. Norton Harmon Bales, the gentleman occupying position six on the Governor-appointed-panel of your board of regents, has not contacted me. His office is not answering telephone calls. At his home no one lifts the receiver of his unlisted telephone, even after fifteen rings. He will not sign for telegrams. A special messenger service could not locate him. Finally, with the aid of a sympathetic newspaper reporter--"

Some ten rows down Tolliver was blowing smoke rings in the air, this in spite of the numerous No Smoking signs posted about the building. The tall boy was whispering something in his ear. Marion flapped his wrist in a gesture of contempt. It was a type of hand flip a sensible man dare not make.

"--We will now place nine chairs on the stage. Bill, you and Art bring out the chairs." The vice president and secretary of the student body arose from their seats and started unfolding some chairs which had been placed just behind the American flag. While they arranged them in a semi-circle behind the main speaker

Jessup continued. "--We shall place these nine chairs here on the stage. We shall see to it that those nine chairs remain on this stage until, and through, tonight. We, the student body officials are hereby extending an invitation to all nine members of the board of regents. We are inviting them to attend the second mass student body meeting which I am hereby calling for eight o'clock tonight--" Jessup paused briefly, just long enough for someone to start clapping. Someone did, and in an instant cheers and applause rocked the building.

So Tom was calling another mass meeting tonight. Of course none of the board of regents would come to it.

"--A chance for them to explain to you, face to face, why, exactly why, they elected to dismiss Dr. Schein--"

Roy was getting uneasy. The meeting would be in the middle of tonight's rehearsal.

"--And if they haven't got the guts to show up and explain to us, then I shall call for a student strike--"

Wild applause. Apprehensively, Roy looked down at Holliver. He and the tall boy had gotten up were trying to edge their way toward the exit chute. As Marion poked his way forward he held his lighted cigarette artistically in the air. Once he stepped on a girl's feet and turned to bow with an elaborate apology.

Grover began to fidget. He glanced at the wall clock. One-twenty-five. Jessup was taking a long time. Between one and two-fifteen Roy had to get over to the drama building, change from his street clothes into the Royal Air Force uniform which had just arrived from Century Costumers in New York and be ready and waiting at the turn-around. This much he certainly

had to do, and if he had time there was something else he should attend to. He should rush home and see if he had gotten any mail. If he didn't do it between now and two-fifteen it would be a long time before he could check the mail basket by the boarding house dining hall.

He had to get out of here. Quickly he began elbowing his way down the risers following very much the same trail Tolliver and the tall boy had gouged out a few seconds before.

"-- not full well the dangers of public reaction, the emotional overtones of the word 'strike'--that weapon as yet so feared and mistrusted in our state of Texas--"

Roy had to step on several toes to get to the balcony chute, and he made a point of apologizing with much more sincerity than Tolliver had. In fact he tried to make his gestures and attitude as different as he possibly could from the two who were opening up a trail ahead of him.

Still, his exit was slow going, and it was one-thirty-three by the time he got out of the gymnasium. The tower clock said one-forty-two when he got to the drama building. The costume room was open, but all the closets were locked up. Several members of the cast had just showed up, and they were wondering how they would get to their costumes. It seemed that everyone, including those students hired to take care of the wardrobe department, were over at the meeting. Finally, at one-fifty-three the janitor came and unlocked the closets. There was barely time for the cast to change and dress and certainly no time for Roy to dart home and check his mail.

Clive was one of the first to be ready and waiting at the turn-around. She had dressed herself in the costume for act II, a red satin cocktail hour creation probably bought down in Houston. Fortunately, the rows of heavy frills were all in the middle leaving her legs and shoulders bare. If it had completely covered her she would have rosted. Roy marvelled that both her hair-do and make-up were elaborately and perfectly done. How had she found time to do it? Surely she had gone to the meeting. There was only one answer, Clive was a marvel of planning. The girl could foresee her schedule for days, weeks or even months ahead and stockpile little details that she would need in the future.

She was busy planning now while she waited for the others to show up. Her plans were for the looming period of excitement, the strike. Neither she nor anyone else doubted that it would come off, and for members of the drama department it looked like a stretch of work rather than relaxation. Of course "Rose" rehearsals would go on (How could Macy have been so odd-ball as to assume they wouldn't?), and in addition they would-have to produce endless entertainment.

As soon as an actor arrived at the turn-around Clive button-holed him and got him "in the know".

"--Cut on the Ad Building steps. They're going to pitch tents. All night vigils. We'll have to keep songs and clic acts going until at least ten o'clock. That'll be tomorrow and afterwards. Tonight we'll have tap dancing until the meeting starts. We're going to need all the talent we've got."

But plans for the coming exciting event was not all she talked about. She had heard some scuttlebutt and was retelling

that.

"Roy, have you heard?" she whispered while jotting down names and schedules for talent. "We're going to lose Beulah Astor."

Roy sensed danger. "Lose?" he asked in a low voice. "What do you mean?"

A big break for her. Director of the legends Cowles vehicle now on tour. Legends and her cast will play here the first week in May. I'm sure you've already bought your ticket for it. Beulah's flying to Denver to take over as director next week. We'll be saying, 'I knew her when'."

Beulah Astor falling into a director's job in the real professional theater--that was, indeed, a promotion. But Roy still felt uneasy. If she left next week that meant she was skipping out before the end of the semester. Men professors quit like that because they were drafted, but there was no reason for a woman to be so sudden. The fact was that an obvious dyke was leaving town when the crisis was getting hot.

Roy did not expect her to show up at the turn-around merely to see the cast off to the photographers. Beulah was not the type to volunteer little niceties like that, especially not for Miss Sorenson's cast. But Roy would make a note to watch her friend, Dol Abbol, who would certainly be there. Would a crack show in the authoress's cold reserve?

trip to the photographer's was always a high point in a rehearsal schedule. The results would be put up in the library's show cases as well as in all the main campus buildings. The best pictures would be published in the student's "Monarch",

and two or three lucky ones would get their pictures in the downtown dailies.

Is , the firm of Dorf's had an exalted reputation. Roy did not know exactly why, but Lena Dorf, the woman who ran the firm was supposed to be more than a mere local photographer. There was something about her being a protegee of a man in Otto- wa and about her having photographed Eleanor Roosevelt.

In spite of being rushed everyone was showing up, not only on time, but a few seconds early. All were well groomed. The cast looked spectacular dressed in its assortment of British armed services uniforms, evening clothes, nurses uniforms and get-ups of fairly authentic front parlor maids. Everyone appeared with hair exactly correct, all collars lying flat, bibs, coats and creases draping exactly right.

Three of the adults would also be photographed, Mr. McKay, Miss Sorenson, and, of course, Dol Abbot. Dol and Miss Sorenson arrived punctually, but not overly so, at a half minute before two-fifteen. They approached the turn-around from opposite directions, and once there came to a rest some twenty paces from each other. Nevertheless both smiled and nodded cordially to each other. Both had made complete changes since the impromptu high-noon meeting. They still looked very summerish in light colored voils, but both had exchanged their broad brimmed hats for little patches of creative straw which had to be hat-pinned to their coiffures. Miss Sorenson, who normally wore glasses, had left hers off. Dol, miraculously, was moving quite gracefully without a cane.

They were to drive down to Dorf's in three cars, Mr. Mc-

key's and two others belonging to students. The student cars were ready and waiting five minutes before hand.. It was McKay who showed up late, by two full minutes. The professor drove up in a three year old, yellow, Lafayette convertible. When new it must have looked very sporty, but now it was beginning to rattle and needed both a wash and a wax job. The top was folded back leaving the brown leather seats to glisten in the sun. You could see a patch on the back one.

If anything McKay was even more stylishly dressed than the two women. His thick dark hair was parted so perfectly it looked as though it had been sprayed in place. When near him you could detect the faint odor of some sort of shaving lotion. He wore a gabardine suit of such a pale gray color that you had to look twice to see it was not the same shade as his white shirt and slightly darker gray tie. The darkest thing about him, other than his hair, was his sun glasses. They were of an over done air force size that left a large part of his face a mystery. When he got parked he stepped out of his car and removed his big glasses and rubbed his eyes. Something was wrong with them. He blew on them and took a gray handkerchief out of his coat pocket and started to wipe them. Rather than muss up his handkerchief he tossed the dark thing over on the dash board, blinked in the hot sun and said, "Well, who's missing?"

Everyone giggled and reminded him he was the one who was late.

"c. It can't be," he said in mock disbelief. "It's every clock in town that's fast. Well, let's get the show on the road before someone waves a wand and turns us into bat guano."

To Roy he looked even more the English butler as he ushered the members of the cast to their various seats in the automobiles. He was so suave that a couple of the girls tried to flirt with him. He smiled and tickled one under the chin and tweaked the other's nose. Once he wisecracked about Dol and Miss Sorenson looking so fresh they must have discovered the fountain of youth then directed them toward the front seat of the car the script girl should drive.

Graciously he opened the right hand door and stood waiting for them to enter. But the two ladies would not be rushed at this point. Miss Sorenson, who never did anything ungracefully, had solved the problem of entering a modern automobile with dignity and she was going to prove it. Slowly, she folded her body while curving it spirally and eased herself under the car's top. All was in except her right leg. Since this extended down to the ground in a very feminine S-curve she was in no hurry to get it inside. Casually she lifted it and eased herself over on the cushion. There. She was in the automobile.

Dol was to sit beside her. She too knew how to get in an automobile, and she was not to be out done. Pausing at the open door, almost as though she were surveying an audience, she looked over the turn-around. Then as quickly as Miss Sorenson had been slow she doubled up one leg on to the seat something the way you would show off a split skirt beach costume, twisted her neck backward so her breasts stood out, gave a half turn and was in the car. A Chevrolet had never been entered with more sex appeal.

Money tapped his hand on the Chevy's door and gave a low whistle. Roy thought he was going to wise-crack again, but he



stopped with the whistle.

Once inside the car Foy realized why both women had ditched their broad brimmed hats and now wore tiny straw patches. Their brains would have fought with each other in the crowded front seat of a car. They, too, had planned ahead.

All were finally loaded. The two student cars took off, and McKay, correctly waiting until they were gone, saved starting his own car until last. All six of his passengers--yes, it was necessary to cram six besides himself into the convertible--were squirming on the hot leather seats. Cheerily, the professor addressed them, "Contact, everybody. We're about to take off."

But he was not quite ready to take off. First he had to reach out and adjust the side-view mirror. It turned out his adjustment was so he could see to straighten his tie rather than to reflect traffic behind him. When the tie was hanging to his satisfaction he again called to everyone, "Comfortable? The leather isn't smoking too much is it?" When he reaped a crop of yes's to the comfortable and no's to the smoking questions he said, "You're a bunch of gold plated liars. You need asbestos underwear to mount the white ghost on a day like this."

It seemed he was calling the lemon yellow Lafayette a "white ghost". Was he color blind or was he heedless of accuracies? He stepped on the starter. The white ghost did not respond. As he ground away a smell of gasoline drifted back to the passenger area.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's knuckles," he said. He paused with the starter grinding a moment to look at each of the gauges on the dashboard. Then he huffed out a breath of irritation, looked again in the side view mirror and re-straightened

his tie. Then he re-commenced grinding the starter the smell of gasoline fumes became overpowering.

Roy muttered, "It's flooded." McKay heard the muttering, and, exasperatedly, said, "I know it's flooded. I can smell as well as you can. Any damn fool can see this damned contraption is flooded. Now, what do you do about it?"

Everybody made suggestions while McKay kept grinding the starter. Soon the grinding noises began to grow weaker, a sign he was running his battery down. Roy muttered, "We're going to have to push if you don't watch out."

"Watch out?" said McKay. "What the hell good would it do to watch out?" The word "hell" was slightly daring for student ears, but everyone seemed to understand that in the world of the theater the inhabitants often lost their temper. Suddenly, the motor coughed. The starter mechanism made clashing noises. The Lafayette coughed again, and black smoke began pouring out the exhaust. The motor changed from a series of sputters to a high racing roar. The tail pipe began emitting fairly light colored gasses, and the cloud of black smoke began to dissipate midst the shrubbery lining the turn-around.

"Hew," breathed McKay as he let the motor die to a sensible idle. Before he actually set the car in motion he once more pattered with his tie. At last they were on their way, and everybody began to make cheerful remarks.

"We've lost the other two cars," said Roy.

"Do you have to bring up that point," said McKay, "right when everyone is feeling so well?"

"Sorry," said Roy.

Olive, the girl with the heavy schedule, had been stealing glances at her wrist watch. She now eased in a question and made it sound casual enough to almost conceal the note of foreboding. "You've been to Dorf's before, haven't you?"

Because he was such a friendly type it was easy to forget that McKay had been teaching on the campus only eight months. He seemed like an old timer. It was significant that only Olive could sense that he might not be good enough at local navigation to get them to their destination. McKay stammered then said, "Uh, yes, I have. Twice, or was it three times? Let's see, that old girl has her shop on Charleston, or is it Mobile? To tell you the truth, I get lost in that God-awful Old Town. It's a rat maze. Why couldn't some civic minded arsonist get his match going and wipe the whole thing out?"

The area they were going to was the original heart of the settlement back when Fort Boomer was only a cluster of shacks around a cavalry camp. Around nineteen ten an oil boom transformed the one-horse town into a city. One-man town would be more correct. When the gusher blew in an old codger named Tate owned almost everything in it. He wanted outrageous prices for his frame dwellings and vacant lots. The new crowd simply moved the town over a half mile and let him die off from an ulcered stomach. So Old Town was now a little pocket of blind alleys on the edge of the real city. Some people thought its illogical street plan was arty. They formed a society to preserve most of the buildings as historical landmarks. Today Dorf's was housed in half of a gingerbread mansion that Tate built for his mother. A restaurant featuring Mexican

food was in the other half. Both business firms had remodeled to fit their line of work. Dorf's had stripped off some of the gingerbread and turned half of the front porch into a waiting room. The restaurant people had modified their portion of the porch into a terrace thirty feet wide and had set up umbrellas covered tables for out door dining. The whole thing was overshadowed by a multi-purpose five floor building standing across the narrow street. Its owners had been able to out maneuver the historical society.

Getting to the edge of Old Town was easy. The cavalry camp had been converted into a large park, nowadays a god-send to the crowded tenderloin district. Four wide boulevards cut across from distant parts of the city to connect with its four corners. Soon McKay and his white ghost were speeding along one side of the park, and he was now faced with choosing the right side street to enter Old Town and get to Dorf's.

"How about that one? Isn't that the little hole we duck into?" he said.

Olive was too eager to volunteer directions. That girl did not have the sixth sense which warns you that it's better to let someone else make an error than correct him. "No, no," she said. "One more block."

"How do you know?" asked McKay peevishly, and Olive told him the land mark was the big elm tree. "Elm?" he asked. "Isn't that fluff of leaves right ahead of us an elm?" Olive replied it was an oak, the elm was one more block down.

"To hell, it's an oak," said McKay. "It can't be an oak. Hold your breath. We're turning in here."

The street he turned into would better have been called an alley. Technically it was a two way thoroughfare, but to make it so you had to forget your ideas of spaciousness and be able to drive with your right wheels no more than two inches from the curb. It wouldn't do to meet a truck.

They were in the bowels of the multi-purpose five-story building. From the park this structure looked as though it were a solid unit, but in reality it was divided into three parts joined together with overhead passage ways. The little street they had turned into was a pick-up-and-delivery path for the various firms occupying the three units. Here the brick walls were set back from the curb by only a foot-and-a-half wide sidewalk. That and the narrowness of the street gave an overall effect of a deep gorge in perpetual shade. In fact, within seventy feet of the parkside street you passed under one of the connecting arcades and found yourself headed into a shadowy brick wall. Seemingly, you were at a dead end.

McKay braked the convertible to a complete stop, scratched his head, straightened his tie, and took off his sun glasses. After five seconds of peering into the gloom he said, "Aha, all is not lost. They haven't trapped us yet. Do I not see an opening, two of them in fact? One to the right, and one to the left?"

Indeed, the brick wall ahead of them was not the end of the thoroughfare. It was merely the joint of a "T". You could go either to the right or the left, in both directions passing under other overhanging arcades.

Olive seemed to be hesitant, and no one else knew what to

do. McKay was about to turn right when Olive, pinching her lower lip with her fingers, spoke up. "I think we go left." McKay wanted to know what made her think so. "Last year," she said, "when Dr. Overstreet was here he and the cast of Twelfth Night got lost some where down here. I wasn't along, but I heard about it. I think you turn left."

But McKay pointed out that they must have, due to his admitted rashness, turned a block too soon. That meant Dorf's lay still further to the right. Olive said, "Well, I don't know. But I remember hearing something about a dead-end."

In a fit of gallantry McKay gave in and said, "Alright, young lady, we'll go left." So, they passed under the left-hand arcade and found themselves in a very tight, dimly lit cul-de-sac. It was the deadest of dead-ends. Looking five floors up passed a set of walls that seemed little more than a wide shaft you could see the brilliance of an April sky. But down on the asphalt covered earth you saw only ominous looking obstructions.

Quickly, McKay braked to a stop, and everyone looked to see where they were. Not more than eighteen inches ahead of the Lafayette's grille was the silvery side of an armored car. It was backed up to a concrete framed doorway. Above the doorway was a small watt bulb attached to the end of an electrical fixture that looked like the ~~curve~~ of a shepherd's crook. It lit up a small sign that said, "Foster's Drugs--Warehouse Entrance".

Immediately on seeing the armored car Roy knew what they had bumbled into, at least he knew what part of it was. It left him flustered. He did not know how Larry Thorpe would re-act, but anyone else as aggressive enough to carry a gun would

snigger at the sight of a teen-age actor dressed up as an RAF pilot. Neither would they take kindly toward a theatrical troop lost in a silly-looking car.

However, as soon as he saw the whole situation he felt an uneasiness more sinister than just embarrassment. First, the Farnsworth crew was not delivering sacks of money. They were delivering pasteboard cartons. Small ones about the size of a pound of butter. There seemed to be only a half dozen of them, and a man with a broad back and banana-sized fingers had them all stacked in the curve of one arm. Such little packages as that one usually sent through the mail. If an armed guard was delivering them they could only be narcotics.

In a flash he saw several other things too. Yes, Larry Thorpe was still a member of the crew. He was standing with drawn, upward pointing pistol, at his usual place to the right of the door. Over on the left was another vaguely familiar face. It was one of those employees who had come and gone with the Farnsworth people. Roy could not remember if he was the last replacement he had seen on the three-man crew or the next to the last. Whoever he was he was now back.

The boss of the gang was what really upset Roy. The well-built, ex-policeman type who had always driven the car before was not the one carrying the little packages from the heavy doors over the back bumper. He was just as well-built, and just as typically an ex-policeman. He was "John".

Roy did not know how his own face looked. Probably it was a complete give away of his entire life's secrets. But John's countenance showed not the slightest trace of recognition and certainly none of discomfiture. He gave one look at the intrud-

ers then calmly picked up the last little package and nestled it along with the others in the curve of his arm. Obviously, he did not consider the intruders threatening enough even to bother with keeping his bundle out of their reach. Casually, he ambled over to the Lafayette. He was going to take his time as he looked it over. McKay was showing signs of exasperation and was looking around for a way to get out. There was only one way, straight back. But John, loosely cuddling his packages, parked himself right by the back bumper and showed no signs whatever that he might step aside and let the cast of A Rose Grows on the White Cliffs of Dover retreat.

He kicked at the back license plate. "You got one screw all the way out. The other one's half out. Let's see, you got a little doo-dad that says 'Fifth Avenue Ford'. That ain't around here. And this thing's a Lafayette. Not a Ford at all. Where'd you get this heap?"

As McKay tried to match John's aplomb Roy glanced over at Larry. His partner had lowered his pistol a good twenty degrees and had taken a step toward the car full of actors. But Larry, rather than meet Roy's eyes, was looking at the pavement.

"How do we get to Dorf's?" said McKay.

"You ain't from around here, are you?" replied John.

"We made the wrong turn. If you'll step only a half page to your left we can be out and on our way."

"Is this car paid for?" said John standing in exactly the same place.

McKay blew out his breath and ran his hand over his hair. "Billy of us to end up in this place, and I apologize. Do you mind if we back out and get on our way?"



John heard him, of course, but did not act like it. With an expressionless face he lifted his large right leg and kicked at the Lafayette's tail pipe. With this one movement he made the thing jiggle as though it were about to fall off. He kept kicking at it. With each blow you expected it to come unscrewed and drop with a clatter to the pavement. McKay huffed and bent forward to press his whole body down on the starter. He looked like a man who had made up his mind to call a bluff. If John was going to keep standing where he was he was going to get run over.

The only thing wrong was the Lafayette did not start. The motor showed no more signs of touching off than it did in the turn-around. Soon the smell of gasoline permeated Foster's shipping entrance. John began to grin with delight. The situation was so delicious that he stopped abusing the tail pipe and came around the car to stand at McKay's door. With a devilish smile on his face he put both hands on the window frame and leaned over the professor's shoulder. His little half-closed eyes surveyed the instrument panel.

"Flooded it, haven't you?" he said.

McKay blew up. "This is a free country. I can flood my automobile if I want to. You can also stand behind my car if you chose to do so. But you'll get horribly mangled in the process."

"Well, I ain't behind your car any more," said John.

"Get your hands off of my window," said McKay. Apparently the country was no longer so free. But John ignored his order.

"You ain't got your key on, have you?" he said.

McKay had more trouble breathing as he flipped the key on. Still his automobile did not start, and it also sounded as though the battery were getting weak.

"Foot board it," said John. "Naw, not half-annie. All the way down. Heck fire, can't you put your foot all the way down? His half-cleansed language shocked the girls.

"I'll do whatever I want to with my foot," said McKay slamming it all the way down to the rubber mat. The car started. The engine coughed, then roared. The tail pipe, clattering, began laying a smoke screen. McKay threw the shift into reverse, and they shot backwards in a half circle. He now had his cast back on the shank of the "T". Like a race course driver fighting for a win he shifted and took the right-hand branch of the "T". With the tail pipe vibrating they zipped under another arcade and in a second were out in the bright light of a little side street. Before them stood the re-vamped Tate mansion.

"Whew," said McKay as he found a place to park directly under an awning shading Dorf's reception room window. Roy thought for a moment he was going to assume the position of Buddha and go into a yoga trance. But he seemed to get over his spell of frustration merely by blowing out his breath with force three times. Thus restored to good humor he smiled to everybody and announced that they were there.

The other two cars, now empty, were parked a hundred feet or so away. Clearly they had left the space by the window for the departmental head, probably because they suspected he would get lost and be flustered when he arrived. They glimpsed Lena Dorf peeking through the window. A split second later her front door opened, and there she stood looking them over.

"No need to ask if you got lost," she said. "Just happy you are here."

Lena Dorf--Roy had no idea if she were "Miss" or "Mrs."--did not look as he had imagined her. Frankly, he had expected a raw boned, rather sexless woman, whose youth was just beginning to fade, and who would certainly have a polished sales manner.

Lena was a short, sixty-ish, dried-up twig. But you would not notice the dried-up part at first. Her quick, flitting movements would catch your eye before that. It was surprising to see how suddenly this little thing swung open her heavy front door and got her palms expectantly rubbing together. Her expensive looking silk dress was a delicate shade of purplish brown. Of course, she wore a pince nez with a fine gold chain draped from its frame to some anchor hidden in the depths of her gorgeous curls.

But there was something lacking about her sales manner. Apparently she had tried to master a pose of smooth graciousness, but it didn't fit her. By nature she was high-strung and snippy, and as old age approached more and more of the waspishness showed through. You could also detect an element of impatient arrogance. As a subject you probably wouldn't hold up to the great ones she had captured in the past. Now she was hell-bent on rushing McKay and the rest of the cast inside, and McKay was letting her do it.

"Hello, Lena dear," he said as she drug him across her polished threshold. While she was trying to push him into her reception room he bent to kiss her cheek. Briefly, she paused to let him peck at it. Extravagant greetings were all right

from members of the theatrical world, but dawdling over them was not. Grabbing the elbow of his coat she settled him in a gold brocade chair. Then remembering her sales lessons she smiled at the rest of the cast, said, "My lands, you're really dressed up, aren't you?", and motioned for them to find seats on other French styled pieces of furniture in her white paneled waiting room. Then she quickly looked each one over to see if their clothes and make-up would do. All the time she was talking.

"My lands, I've had to re-arrange my whole day to fit you people in. The Farley Mitchells, their adopted daughter. I've even had to put off Dr. Schein's secretary a half hour." Clearly, she was a name dropper. The name Farley Mitchell rung a bell in Roy's memory— oh yes, the politician the Morris's knew. The mention of Schein's secretary made him wonder just which side of the political fence this woman would be on. The conservative Farley Mitchell's were not likely to be hob-nobbing with the Schein crowd. But it seemed Lena could take them all in, no matter which side of the fence they were on. This point of view was reflected in her comments on the crisis.

"That fool Jessup. A strike. That green kid is trying to call a strike. Strike my eye. That little upstart doesn't know what the word means. He'll just tear up everything. Oh, don't get me started on that. I can't stand suckers. And that's just what those fool students will be. Well. Let's get going with these photographs. Now then. I've already got your names, and I'll call you in when your scheduled. There's a nice patio out back. It belongs to me, not that noisy crowd next door. You may wait out there if you get restless, but don't, whatever

you do, run off. Oswald, honey, don't let them run off."

The professor assured her he would keep them under control, but she replied, "That's what you say, but I don't know about you. Imagine a theater man careless with appointments."

Then she disappeared through a door, and as she did so they got a glimpse of her generous sized studio beyond. It seemed to be lined with seamless white paper on all sides. An overhead track for moveable spotlights dominated the ceiling. Dismembered furnishings were scattered about--a wrought iron balcony which sat on the floor, a bannister that began and ended nowhere, and more heavily brocaded French furniture. They also saw where some of the other two car loads of their cast were. Dol was already under a spot light waiting for the grand mistress to snap the shutter. Miss Sorenson was carefully checking her dress. It seemed that Miss Abbol was to be photographed tapping a cigarette, a plain white one not in a holder. She certainly looked sophisticated.

"Dol baby ought to have a holder," said McKay.

Lena caught the remark, the pun and all, and turned in the doorway to answer him. "No. No cigarette holders. Not at Dorf's. They're a vulgar cliché."

When she had closed the door everyone began looking around the room. It was a room worth looking at even if you had seen it before. The plush carpet, the severe white walls, the lead glass windows that beveled into prisms at the edges, the green awning that filtered and softened the hot afternoon sun, all this was different from the University. Here you were in the atmosphere of someone already arrived, not plunked down in a fakey stage setting designed to show students what

the great world had produced. The numerous excitements of the day seemed insignificant. Here was something more important, the lair of a nationally recognized creative artist.

You would expect a photographer's reception room to have a generous display of his wares. Lena Dorf did have a display, but not a generous one. On the white panel directly opposite the lead glass window hung a modestly framed eight by ten photograph. It was a brown tinted close-up of Mrs. Roosevelt wearing a coal miner's forehead light. A small smudge, perhaps coal dust, streaked one of her cheeks. A dark background glistened with a texture that could be the sides of a coal mine. In the whole room not another photograph, painting nor wall plaque competed with the importance of this one hanging. There were just the white walls, the fascinating light from the window, the mysterious hues of the carpet, the feel of the antique brocade to attract your attention. It was enough. The sparseness of the furnishings accented the importance of the few details. You wanted to examine each object closely.

But Roy could not forget the events of the day. "Where's the patio?" he asked. "I feel like I need to move around."

At once McKay uncrossed his legs, popped up from the Louis Quinze and said, "Out back. I'll show you."

Roy felt embarrassed. Professors rarely offered to do little favors for students. The others present would certainly notice it too and would wonder why the Grover kid was being singled out.

Perhaps some of the others did notice and wonder, but Olive did not. Immediately she too popped up and said, "Ditto about needing to move around. I'll go with you."

McKay actually frowned at this, but his furrowed brow was wasted on the usually perceptive Olive. She talked glibly about the coming strike as she, McKay and Roy filed out into the hall.

"I think Miss Dorf is right," she said. "We'd better not count on striking. Something will happen to stop it. However, we shouldn't be bluffed out too soon."

In the hall were more white panels and a slightly denser display of photographs. Before you reached the heavy Spanish style door in the back you passed by two carefully lit eight-by-tens. One was of an old Indian woman, her face a net work of wrinkles, each one accented with sidelighting. The other was a stark candid type photograph. It was a waist-high close-up of a little girl in pitiful rags. She stood before a rusted corrugated iron wall. One eye was swollen and black. Lena might not care for strikes, but she had an eye for social problems.

Passed the Spanish door was a patio. Although its dripping fountain gave the illusion of repose and coolness, the whole thing was really too small and crowded to fit in with the high walls on three sides of it. Something like twenty-by-twenty feet you had the feeling you were walking into an outdoor bathroom, not a palm lined living room. The fourth wall was not really open either. Someone, probably Lena, had built an eight foot adobe fence there. Beyond it you could hear the clattering of dishes. If the wall weren't there you probably would be seeing the garbage cans of the Mexican restaurant. There was no gate leading to any street beyond. You felt slightly trapped.



Some more members of the cast were there, the policeman, the two scrub women, and the ambulance crew. All were crowded on to the little benches framing the fountain. Space was so scarce that palm fronds from the side plantings draped between them or over their shoulders. Everyone waved to McKay, and soon they were joking about his getting lost. The professor stuck close to Roy and at the first opportunity whispered to him, "The privacy of a gold fish back here. Let's find some where else. Maybe the old gal has got a can some where."

Again Roy was embarrassed. McKay was trying to talk to him about something. It might be something indelicate, such as the mess Marion Tolliver was into. Whatever that mess was Roy would just as soon stay out of it. He was prepared to deny knowing that sexual instincts of any nature existed rather than stick his foot into this problem. Any way, he did not want to talk with McKay. Too much of a fashion plate. If you ducked into a corner with him everyone would suspect the worst.

The cast, of course, babbled about the student meeting and the looming strike. Someone had also heard the rumor that Beulah Astor was to leave. They asked McKay for the straight poop. Impatiently, he claimed he knew nothing. At once Olive spoke up to tell what she had heard, the sensational news that their own Beulah was to direct Magda Cowles.

While she was telling it McKay again nudged Roy. "I'll bet there's a men's can over in that Mexican joint. Let's investigate."

It was more of a command than a suggestion. It was hard to refuse. But it would put Roy where he did not want to be,



in a rest room with a man who was a tiny bit obvious. It was doubly embarrassing because the two of them were separated by the social line dividing student and faculty member. No one crossed the line except for important reasons. Taking a pee was not anywhere near important enough. In every building on the campus there were doors marked "Men's" or "Ladies' Faculty Lounge". At no time did a professor go into an ordinary student rest room. McKay, however, seemed impatient with this nicety.

On the other hand he didn't act like a man on the make but like he had something important to tell. Roy was getting apprehensive as to what that something might be. He'd better play along.

"Come on," whispered McKay. "We can go back through the hall if that fool Olive will leave us alone."

Elaborately he looked at his wrist watch then headed toward the Spanish door as though there were something inside he had forgotten to do. After a moment Roy followed him. Inside the hall Miss Sorenson button-holed McKay. "I think her lighting is terrible," she whispered. "We're all going to look like starving bread-liners. Can't you put in a suggestion?"

"Not me, Honey," said McKay. Again he looked at his watch and headed for the front door as though there were something urgent, this time on the street, that he must perform. Roy followed him.

Out in the sunlit street Oswald McKay seemed undecided what to do. Instead of advancing toward the restaurant end of the building he just stood on the sidewalk and looked at the awning covered tables. As he looked he straightened his tie. Since it was an off hour in the afternoon the Mexican place had only two customers. One was an average looking woman

dressed neatly, thirty-ish. She sat at a corner table near the terrace wall. Diagonally opposite her in the corner by the sidewalk sat a worker type man, also thirty-ish. He had tucked the restaurant's blue and yellow napkin in the V of his khaki shirt and was washing down a taco with a glass of beer. The woman fingered her napkin where it was placed in her lap and daintily sipped at a pale green soda. The two never looked at each other.

"We ought to push them together some way," said McKay without making any attempt to find a restroom. He also remarked that the five story multi-purpose building was so ugly they should plant vines to cover it up. And as for the Tate mansion someone should set a match to it. Impulsively he said, "How's your folks?"

"Folks?" said Roy. He wanted to add that he hadn't come out to talk about his parents, but on second thought he decided that would be better than taking a pee in the same urinal as the head of his department.

"Your mama and pape don't live around here, do they? Some where in Oklahoma, isn't it?"

Roy was a little surprised that McKay had looked up his home address, but he said, "Yes, they do live up there, and they don't know a thing about the theater. They think I'm crazy to want to act."

"Well, yes," said McKay. "You didn't get a chance to go home, I mean to your boarding house, or wherever you live, did you?"

"Go home?"

"I mean at lunph."

Roy got nervous. What might be in his mail was what he did not want to face. Certainly he didn't want to discuss it with one of his professors. The dean, a man removed from his daily lessons, would be problematic enough. McKay might be acting like a friendly person, but the fact remained he was in a position of authority. That topic, the one he didn't want to mention, should not be discussed unless it was absolutely necessary. Roy was convinced it would not be necessary, not even with the dean. After all, no one had anything on him.

However, there was one minor little point. "John" had re-emerged in his life. But John was far removed from the university crowd. Keep quiet about him and no official at the university could pin a thing on him. He must de-rail McKay some way, blot out this topic that he seemed hell-bent on bringing up.

"I often leave off the noon meal," he lied. "Uh, I can't remember. Uh, yes, I think I ate lunch." This was ridiculous. A terribly amateurish lie. As he stuttered it out he knew perfectly well McKay would not believe him. The man would probably laugh at him.

But McKay only fidgeted with his hair and said, "I see." What on earth did he see? Roy looked him over closely for tell-tale clues on his face.

Impulsively McKay said, "I think you're going to get a post card. In fact I know you're going to get a post card. Dr. Rugger called me into his office this morning and showed me a list he had made out. Uh, it's a damn fool list. I don't want you to get scared. But you were on the list, and I know you're going to have to go in and see him. What I mean is--

I'm wondering about your parents. Would they stand by you, if--if something came up?"

Roy turned pale. Why on earth would his parents have to be brought in on this? "Nobody's going to write to my parents, are they?" he said. McKay must be an alarmist. Since he was entirely innocent--almost--there was no chance his parents would hear about this. Almost no chance.

McKay's voice softened. It softened a little too much. This man was treating Roy like a child. Why didn't he mind his own business. If the dean was going to call him into the office there was no need for the professor to warn him. "They might try to scare you. That's what I'm worried about. You damn kids are just putty in a smart man's hands. You're so gullible. What I'm trying to tell you is, I think you ought to get a lawyer. Look here. I don't know this man personally, but I do know he's a lawyer here in town who's given the university some trouble, kept them from walking over hog wild--well, any way, here's this man's address--"

McKay held out a slip of paper, a page torn from a scratch pad. He must have written down the address before they ever met at the turn around. It said "Donald Sprague" and had a telephone number.

"I haven't got any money," said Roy.

McKay said he realized all that. "But if you're really in trouble lawyers will usually see you at least once even if you are broke. What I'm wondering about is your parents. Would they help you out? Maybe they would pay for a lawyer bill. I mean I don't think you ought to go up to that dean's office

without being wised up. You don't realize how they are going to lead you into little traps. A kid your age just can't stand up to it."

Roy was dumbfounded. All he knew to do was shout his complete innocence. That's the line he should have taken from the first. "I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't done anything. I mean I haven't done anything wrong."

"I know you haven't. But they might try to take you out of the play. I wouldn't want that to happen. This ruddy-bloody play contest has been trouble enough already without having to change actors in mid-str-am--"

Roy's consternation deepened. How could they take him out of the play? Again he declaimed his innocence. He almost screamed it. "I haven't done any thing. I'm not a fool like Tolliver. I haven't got mixed up with the wrong crowd. They can't do anything to me."

McKay said, "Fine, fine. I'm sorry I brought this up. I stepped out of hand when I did. But would you please just call up that man Sprague in case the going gets rough. Maybe you ought to call him up tonight. That number's supposed to ring in two places, his office and his apartment. He lives in an apartment," he added with a touch of emphasis in his voice.

Roy understood the emphasis and wished he didn't. The lawyer was probably single, living in an apartment and devoting his life to the world's shady angles. Why must he get mixed up with such a person?

McKay was rambling on some more. This man talked too much. "--I'd like to give you some tips about traps you might fall

into. But I might make things worse if I did, and the wife is trying to nurse the baby over a cold. I'm sorry I really could not see you tonight. That's why I'd like to mention that lawyer again. You'll at least give him a ring, won't you?"

All sorts of things were throwing Roy off balance. He had not imagined what kind of private life McKay might lead, but the mention of a wife and baby surprised him. Perhaps the surprise showed in his face, but by now he was getting back a little self control. If he was innocent, it was bad business to scream about it, and from now on, either with McKay or the Dean, he would be calm. "Thank you for your advice," he said. "You must have gone to a lot of trouble on my account. Thank you."

"Yes," said McKay blankly. The 'yes' might have meant anything. "Yes. Now then Lena is probably screaming that I've let a member of the cast run off. Let's get back inside. Sorry to have frightened you. I'm sure everything will work out fine."

During Roy's sitting Lena Dorf complained he was smiling like a jack-o-lantern. "How can I get character from your face if you're going to warp it out of shape? Be natural."

It was difficult for Roy to be natural at least so Lena could recognize it as such. When he relaxed his smile she complained he looked frightened. "What's the matter with you?"

"Concentrate," Miss Sorenson suggested from the side of the all-white studio. "Get in character."

When all were photographed and the cast was filing out the front door McKay discovered he had misplaced his car keys.

"Ozzie, you ought to carry a purse," Lena said bluntly.

"Women don't loose half as many things in purses as men do in their pockets."

Miraculously someone found McKay's keys dropped at the curb about where he and Roy had been standing. Lena wanted to know how on earth they had gotten there.

At last Roy was deposited in front of his boarding house. The afternoon was past its peak. Within an hour supper would be served, soon after that rehearsals. It was a crowded day. The post card was waiting for Roy in the box by the living room door where the landlady dumped all the mail. His card was the only thing left from the noon time delivery. It was lying with the message side up. No telling how many boys in the house had read it.

Yes, Roy was commanded to be at the dean's office tomorrow at eleven o'clock. Probably the dean's secretary had looked up his schedule of classes and put him down for interview at his first free hour.

Upstairs Roy was to encounter another unpleasantry. Marion Tolliver was waiting for him in his room. Tolliver was now cleaned up, freshly shaved with hair combed. Again he was the old, over-dressed Tolliver, the mis-fit set apart and, he hoped, above the other students. He wore a spotless white shirt and a light pink summer tie and puffed on a meerschaum pipe.

He was casually making small talk with Roy's roommate and at once broke off to say, almost flippantly, "Hello, old man. You're late for the appointment."

It would do no good to speak up and say there had been no appointment. Grover let Tolliver lead him downstairs as

though they were going out some where. But as soon as they were on the sidewalk and out of sight of the boarding house windows Marion stopped and said, "Did you see your card? You got one, didn't you?"

Roy realized it would serve no purpose to try to conceal this fact from Tolliver nor anyone else. What he needed now, if he were going to triumph in tomorrow's interview, was information.

"Of course," he said. "You saw it in the box. So what? If the dean wants to see me that doesn't mean I'm getting booted out of school."

Tolliver smirked. His pose was that of one who had far greater experience in life than Grover. Calmly he puffed on his pipe and said. "Have it your own way. What I wanted to do was ask you a favor. I'm joining the Navy. I leave tomorrow morning. You know I have this very valuable record collection, the originals of early operas. I haven't any where to ship them. Could I get you to keep them for just a month, something like a month, and I'll write you and arrange for you to ship them some where--"

"Record collection?" Roy was disturbed. He did not want to hear about a record collection. Above all he did not want to get stuck with keeping a large amount of crated-up material in his small room. "What happened with the dean? You did go to the dean's office, didn't you? Was he mad because you were late? What did he ask you? What's this all about?"

Tolliver took the pipe out of his mouth and, with arched eyebrows, said, "My dear fellow, you know what it's all about.



I once slept with a man. Yes, a man. You slept with him too. His name was 'John'. I slept with him a week after you did. The same hotel room, number four-oh-six in the Palace. He said he had 'entertained' you, and you were a stuffy little prig. Maybe he said 'prick'. I don't remember which word he used."

Roy tried to keep expression out of his face. "John?" he said. "I don't know anyone named John."

"Have it your way. About the records. I'm sorry, I won't be able to pay you anything for keeping them, that is not in advance. It so happens I'm all out of money now. I know it's going to crowd you, but I just now asked your roommate, told him I was joining the service. He talked like it would be all right to leave my boxes of records on one side of your room."

"Well, maybe it's all right with him, but it's not all right with me. You've got so much stuff it'll fill up half the room. The landlady won't put up with it."

"Not even for a man going into the service?"

Roy paused to think things over. He did not want to be unreasonable, and he wanted more information. "Did this John person you mentioned blab to the dean?" he asked.

"No, it was the hotel dick. The room was bugged."

"Bugged?"

"A microphone, probably behind the picture over the head-board," said Tolliver. "The dean played part of the recording."

"Oh," said Roy. He bit his lip as he thought this over. It looked like he was, indeed, treading in quicksand. He had better be careful how he trusted anyone. Slowly he began walking down the sidewalk asking Tolliver innocent questions, trying not to make him mad; trying to draw information out of him.

He learned that the dean had played only a half minute or so of the recording made by means of the microphone. That half minute had contained some dirty words, phrases usually known only to gay people. The dean had produced only the recording, not the testimony of any hotel detective, no declaration from "John" nor from anyone else. Roy decided Tolliver had been a fool. Those dirty words ripping through the sterilized air of the dean's office had scared him into joining the service.

"Do you know John's real name?"

Marion avoided a direct answer but went on prattling that the navy was not so bad. "A smart man can make out any where."

"Have you seen John since then?"

Again Tolliver side-stepped answering. "Oh, John is all right. Actually in the service you won't have anything to worry about. Three meals a day. A place to sleep. The smart ones stay away from bullets."

By careful prying Roy finally learned that there was more to Marion's troubles than the queer business. By probing like a surgeon he found out the dean had jumped the tall fellow about narcotics. He got only incomplete snatches of the story, but this much came out. Someone had sold Marion a reefer. Roy could not learn who sold it nor if the pusher had entered his life before or since. But five minutes after this particular sale he had been arrested. The cop took him to police headquarters. "But that was as far as the flat-foot got. A lawyer sprung me."

"Who was the lawyer?"

"Oh, everyone knows about Spraguey boy. Sprague is always giving the university fits. Every time they start to throw

someone out Donald boy pops up and stops them. Sprague was the one who told me about joining the navy. He knew the university had a policy--join the service and it won't show on your record as expelled. If you join in mid-term they'll even give you credit for the whole semester's work. So when I signed for the Navy this morning I knew I was fixing it so I'd get a diploma in June. I was already under the protection of Uncle Sam when I walked into the dean's office this afternoon. There wasn't anything he could do to me."

"You mean Sprague wasn't with you when you went into the dean's office."

"Oh Sprague had given me this advice a long time ago. I didn't need to hire him again. Sprague is expensive. By the way, I'm broke. I've got two cents in my pocket. When I show up at the recruiting office tomorrow morning at seven I can demand a breakfast, but I'd like to eat a bite or two between now and then. You couldn't furnish a meal for a buddy going into the service, could you?"

Roy thought a moment before he answered. Time was so short. Within minutes they'd be serving supper at the boarding house. After that were rehearsals. Then there was this business of the student meeting, but of course he would have to pass that up. Still it would be going on while the cast was working on their parts in the auditorium. All this activity made the day seem so crowded. Besides all this it now looked like he was going to have to find time to do some other things, some little things that he would have to nudge into his schedule some way. Did he even have time to count the change in his pocket and see if he had enough to spare Tolliver a meal?

He felt sorry for Tolliver, and it was true he was going into the service. The man was such an idiot, a born idiot, or he would not have been stupid enough to get mixed up in narcotics. How could he ever expect to stay out of trouble if he were queering it and smoking reefers at the same time. And he had impulsively joined up in order to duck out of the whole thing. And when his hour was at its worst he had not had sense enough to consult a lawyer.

Well, Roy told himself, he was different. Roy Grover was not mixed up with narcotics. He was not going to get mixed up with narcotics. He was not going to get frightened. Above all he was not going to join the Navy nor any other branch of the service.

The service was a prison, a prison without bars. And like the barred kind the worst part about it was the other in-mates jailed along with you. They would sense you weren't their kind; then they'd start jeering you, feed you practical jokes, lay for you in chow lines, beat you up.

Poor Tolliver. Couldn't he see they'd guess he was a misfit at once?

"--Even a hamburger would taste good," Marion was saying. It sounded so funny, Tolliver begging in correct standard stage diction. "As you know I wasn't under full sail even by lunch time today. I'm sure I didn't have breakfast this morning, and I can't remember what I had last night. But I'm cleaned up now. Respectable. I always try to look respectable. I'd even appreciate it if you'd go to the restaurant with me and keep me company. Tomorrow, remember, you'll be rid of me. I'll be in the service."

Since time was running out Roy quickly made a decision. "I'll tell you what. You eat here at the boarding house with me. And while we're inside we'll ask the landlady if she can keep your phonograph records under the house."

This didn't satisfy Tolliver at all. While a minute ago he had stated a hamburger would be good the actual offer of a boarding house meal brought a different response. "I told you I was going into the service in the morning. I told you I would pay you back for all expenses within a month. Surely at least a second class restaurant, such as Scarborough's--"

"I can't. I can't loan any money. I've promised myself that."

"--Or the Tripple X--"

"No."

"Very well," he said. "Very well about the meal. But 'under the house' won't do as a place for records. I have told you they are antique records. All you have to do is look at the foundation and see there's no more than two feet of space vertically. Much of it is less than that. To get my crates in there I'd have to crawl on my belly even if I could force them in at all. There'd be nothing but those lattice frames to protect the area from whatever might blow, slither or seep under the house. No, I won't hear to it. Not my phonograph records."

Roy foolishly pointed out that this was war. "Just think what the bombed out people in England are putting up with."

"'War'. 'This is war'. I don't want to hear such phrases," said the man who was about to go into the service. "They are nothing more than excuses for doing things sloppily."

"All right then, there's the coal shed. You must have seen it behind the house. It's got one window and a padlocked door. The landlady's got it crammed full of things. Maybe she can find a space for a crate or two."

He uttered the words, 'crate or two' with significance. Tolliver became quiet. Both of them knew there would be far more to store than one or two crates. Marion bit his lip, and Roy used this opportunity to remind him that his plan to store records upstairs on one side of his own room was no good. "The whole house will break into your boxes and play everything." However, Tolliver insisted when he got through crating his possessions no one would be able to chip off so much as a splinter.

"But you won't have time to do elaborate packing. The afternoon is almost gone. And you've said something about celebrating your last night of freedom. Oh come on. We're getting no where. Let's go see the landlady."

To Roy Marion was disgusting. Tolliver must be the older by sixteen or seventeen years, yet he was acting like a kid brother. Celebrate his last night of freedom, indeed. On whose money? Roy's? And with whom? Roy, himself, had to rehearse. That would leave Tolliver, first, to pack phonograph records, and later to walk the streets looking for a pick-up--one with money. What had he been doing all afternoon besides telling off the dean and cleaning himself up? Why had he bothered to dress himself up so nattily if he didn't even have the price of a meal? And if he met the recruiting bus at seven in the morning it looked like he would show up after having had no sleep at all. He was a fine one to complain about doing things sloppily.

Mrs. Sollers, the landlady, barely paused at the swinging door between the kitchen and the steamy dining room. "Eat? Who eat? You're talking about a guest when the bell's about to be rung? Don't bother me. It'll be six o'clock in a split second."

In one hand she held a large platter of liver and onions, in the other a tureen of gravy. She was right, it was, indeed, a bad time to ask her about serving an unannounced guest. Her husband was as busy as she. Back in the kitchen he limped from cupboard to work table hurrying to line up the pickle dishes, the celery sticks and the stacks of light and dark bread. Years ago he must have been a well-built man, but a farm accident had taken three of his toes and his zest for life. Now he had grown an enormous pot.

"Don't bother the missus," he said.

The missus continued to scold Roy and his visitor. "Coming up with a guest five seconds before I have to let in the stampede. You know the rule. Tell me by noon, and it's fifty cents extra."

"He's leaving for the navy in the morning. They gave him his orders this afternoon," said Roy. He knew he was stretching the truth to mention the word "orders". Marion, himself, had fled to the navy for refuge. But the explanation worked wonders. Mrs. Sollers set the liver down and said, "Well." Back in the kitchen her husband also said, "Well." With kindly eyes both of them paused to look the new-comer over. Mr. Sollers noticed Tolliver's hair.

"They'll cut those purty waves off, young feller," he said.

"Hush," said Mrs. Sollers, and she listened patiently

while Roy explained about Tolliver's collection of phonograph records. Ordinarily the landlady would have had no patience with someone who must hang on to unessentials like music. However, she did ask one question, "What kind of records?"

Roy had already stretched the truth more than he had wanted to when he mention the word 'orders', so he told her flatly they were collectors items all from operas. There was a bad moment while she blew out her breath. But probably she was thinking that whatever the guest might be now the navy would soon make a man of him. So, while quickly arranging the rest of her table, she gave some orders.

"Doyle will fix it up for you just as soon as I get the meal going. Doyle", she called to her husband as though he might be far out in the backyard instead of four feet away from her, "this young man's got a little package he wants to store under the house--"

"I done heard about it," said Mr. Sollers.

"--You'd better go out with Doyle now. Get a place picked out. Then you two kids can come back and eat at the second serving. Well, yes. Well, I guess we can forget about the fifty cents extra. Yes, since he's going into the service."

Tolliver was already fidgeting. He had not liked that part about 'under the house'. But Roy saw a chance to slough the whole record problem off his hands. "Fine," he said. "Marion, you and Mr. Sollers can get the storage place picked out. I've got something to do upstairs."

The boarding house telephone had two extensions. One-- which was out of the question--was near the dining table. The other, within sight and sound of half the occupants, was mid-



ways down on the wall of the upstairs hall. Usually, no one minded such an exposed location. The most common reason for phoning was to make a date, and if the whole house knew about it, so much the better.

But calling a lawyer was another matter. However, by the time Roy got up to the second floor Mrs. Sollers had rung the dining room bell. As far as Roy could tell he now had the whole second floor to himself. With luck he could keep the whole matter secret. As he lifted up the receiver he heard faint snatches of acrimonious conversation coming from outside toward the back of the house. Doyle and Marion were having their first disagreement about storing antique records.

Donald Sprague's number gave a busy signal, a bad break. He needed to get an idea how much the lawyer was going to charge him before he rushed into his room to write a quick letter to his father. From the dining hall the noises told him the evening meal had just begun. With luck he would have twelve, maybe fifteen minutes before the fast eaters would barge back upstairs. But Marion and Mr. Sollers might have a spat at any minute. Either one of them might try to mix Roy into it. He must get ahold of Sprague as quickly as possible. Perhaps he had hit the tail end of a conversation. He hung up, counted ten and dialed once more. The lawyer's number was still busy.

He counted to thirty. While he was doing so he heard undistinguishable sounds coming from the backyard. Someone must be crawling under the house. A moment later he heard the landlady's husband rip out the word "shit". Things must have been going very badly between he and Tolliver because the missus was death on swearing. After a third try the lawyer's

line was still occupied.

What could he do? How much did lawyers charge? Could he guess at it? Surely Sprague didn't expect students to be able to stir up much more than ten dollars. He should have pumped Tolliver about the cost, but if possible he wanted to keep that man in the dark about what he was doing.

While he was waiting for the line to clear he could telephone Larry Thorpe's house. Trying to contact Larry at all was a foolish thing to do. After all he did not know for sure what that man thought of him. Very likely he was about to get a bawling out. But he was now faced with an emergency that might get him kicked out of school and completely out of Thorpe's life. He must be prepared to risk a bad rebuff. How else was he going to find out about "John"?

At six o'clock in the afternoon the chances were both Georgia and Larry would be at home. They must be about to sit down for supper if they weren't already eating it. Which one of them would answer the phone? If it turned out to be Georgia what would he tell her?

The Thorpe phone was not busy. Georgia answered it after the third ring. Her "Hello" sounded tired and flat, just what you would expect if you called her at the nursing home, but in her own residence it made you dread to go on with the conversation.

Roy had decided that if she answered he would state, in a business like way, that he would like to speak to Mr. Thorpe. There was little chance that she would recognize his voice especially since she could not be expecting him to call. More than likely she would say, "Just a moment, please". After a pause he would hear Larry's 'Hello'.

"Mr. Thorpe, please," he said.

"Mr. Thorpe? Why, this is that Grover boy, isn't it? You sure sound like it. Isn't this Roy Grover?" Georgia had recognized him at once.

He had a lie ready even for this eventuality. "Yes, it's me. I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. Thorpe. I know you must be eating supper? We're about to eat supper here at the boarding house, but something important has come up. Could I speak to Mr. Thorpe?"

"What has come up?"

"I saw your husband this afternoon. I mean I saw his boss. Or rather I saw both of them. I spoke to his boss and just saw Mr. Thorpe. I mean I almost spoke to his boss--"

"Boss?"

"The big fellow who was driving the armored car today. I heard someone call him 'John'. I mean I think they were talking to him, they might have been talking to someone else. The thing is he dropped a package, one of those that are about as big as a pound of butter in our car. That was Mr. McKay's car--"

"Package? I'm sorry, Roy, but my husband isn't here. He may not be in until late tonight. Did you say you had a package? If you have why don't you bring it to me at the rest home in the morning?"

"Oh, but you aren't at the rest home, are you? I heard it was going to close down."

"We'll be there for the rest of this week. You haven't opened this package, have you?"

It looked like nothing was going to work out. He half suspected Thorpe was there in the room with her, perhaps hearing the whole conversation. Surely she was lying about his staying away from home except for a few of the wee hours in the dark of the night. Some how he had to find out who John was. There must be some way to get her talking instead of asking him questions.

"I had a letter from Blanche. You remember Blanche don't you? She and Clifford are out in California now. They've been at some place called El Toro since February. Cliff might have to have another operation. Blanche asked about you. She wanted to know how many words a minute you could type by now." Blanche had not asked about Georgia. The last letter he had gotten from Blanche, one that he had neglected to answer, was all about Cliff's intestinal flare-up. He had come down with a bad vomiting spell a week before he was due to be sent over seas. He was still hospitalized. With such things to worry her his sister had certainly not mentioned Georgia.

But this little extra lie did its work. As precious minutes went by Georgia began talking about her work. "Why I hardly do any typing at all for those people. It's mostly book work, and when we get moved into the new place--it's going to be within sight of the lake, not far from our house over here on this side of town--"

When they moved into the new place she would be more of a nurse than a bookkeeper. With entirely too much detail she explained about the problems of moving, about the fact that the doctor in charge was being called into uniform, even the

head nurse was thinking about volunteering for the air force.

"This package," she suddenly changed the conversation, "I don't hardly see how he could have dropped it in the car."

Quickly Roy saw an opportunity, and he took it. "Who?" he asked.

"Jim Griswald. You must mean Jim. He's been driving the truck since Buck went to work in Mexico. How on earth did Jim drop a package? It isn't like him at all."

"How--how could I get in touch with Mr. Griswald?"

It was no use. Every time she should have come up with the man's address or his phone number she started asking Roy questions. Or else she got into a long rambling story about how times were changing so fast, and she was afraid all of her old friends would slip away. Even she and Larry might have to move away. Was Roy doing alright in school?

Finally, she started talking about Dr. Schein getting fired. "They've called off that student strike, haven't they?" she asked. When Roy asserted, no, it was not off at all, she said, "Well, I'll swan, I heard it was. You aren't going to get mixed up in it, are you?"

At last Roy had to hang up. Outside the noises had shifted from the back of the house to the coal shed. Tolliver must have gotten Mr. Sollers to show him some free space in that little building. No words came through clear enough to be understood, but the general tone did not sound any more harmonious than what he had heard from under the house. Down in the dining room he heard someone mention ice cream. Dessert must be on the table. He had only a few minutes.

Sprague's line was still busy. It meant he would have to guess at the cost of a lawyer's fee. In his room he could not find his own package of envelopes. Quietly, he tip-toed over to his roommate's dresser and took one out of his bottom drawer.

"Dear Pop," he wrote. And then what else should he say? He must write that he is sick. But what would a boy in the sunny state of Texas come down with in April? "I had to go to the doctor's today. I've been feeling bad at my stomach. I might have appendicitis--"

No, that would not do. You either had appendicitis or you did not. If you had it you were operated on at once. Something that required expensive X-rays would be better. But how can you cure yourself of tuberculossis after only one doctor's examination?

He had an idea. His vision had perhaps become a little blurry. Movies weren't as clear as they used to be. Probably he really did need the lowest power of glasses. So he told his father he was having terrible headaches from eye strain. He must have an eye examination and glasses. "Please send twenty-five dollars at once. There's so much studying here at the end of the semester if I'm to pass my courses."

When he had signed his story he "borrowed" a stamp from the same place he had gotten the envelope. A couple of diners were coming up the stairs. With the newly written letter tucked in his shirt he only nodded to them as he passed them in the hall. It took him barely a minute to rush out the front door, dart across the street and put his letter in the corner mail box.

Back in the boarding house Mrs. Sollers was ready to serve him and Tolliver. Marion was having a hot argument with

Doyle Sollers about the advisability of a fourth term.

"No one else could possibly carry the weight and prestige with our fighting allies that Roosevelt would command--"

"That man is nothing but a filthy rich playboy who's never done a lick of work in his life--"

Throughout the meal of liver and onions Roy could not tear the two away from the Roosevelt question long enough to find out if they had settled on a place to store Tolliver's collection. When at last Marion had licked the last of his icecream the clock showed ten minutes to seven. Why did so many distractions have to come up on a crowded day? If Roy were to get to rehearsals on time he would have to rush to the auditorium. It was at this point that Tolliver broke the news. Neither the coal shed nor the area under the house would do. For only a month Grover would have to keep the crates up in his room.

"I'll get them packed by ten o'clock. Perhaps --well, maybe by ten-thirty. Do you know of anyone who can pick them up and bring them over to your house?"

Roy blew up. He wouldn't put up with it. No, he knew of no one with a car. And if Tolliver dumped anything in his room he would immediately move them below the floor himself. "Can't you plan anything through? Do you have to go off half cocked all the time?"

"Ah. I have another idea if your room just won't do. Your relatives, a sister and brother-in-law, I think, have a house out in River Terrace. I once heard it had a large garage. There must be storage space out there. You wouldn't have to keep my things upstairs but a day or two, and when you find

transportation you can carry them out to River Terrace. You see how much I am trusting you--to transport them with care as well as choose a safe, dry place--"

"No."

"It will only be for as long as I'm in boot camp. Then I can send for them."

Impossible. Impossible. There wasn't time to point out the complete absurdity of this scheme. The River Terrace house had been rented, vacated and re-rented at least once. He had no idea who was living in it now. If they were paying rent for a garage they certainly wouldn't let anyone else store things there. He threw up his hands and went out the front door. Admittedly this was a very curt way to take leave of a man about to fight for the country. So Roy called over his shoulder, "I'll see you after rehearsals. We'll get everything settled then. You'd better try to get some sleep for tomorrow."

Rehearsals, as always, started punctually even though most of the cast seemed to be in a somewhat distracted state. Roy managed to scoot into the wings ten seconds before Miss Sorenson clapped her hands and said, "Cast on stage." A lot of whispering was going on between the actors. Some of it was small talk, more of it was various forms of flirting, but a great deal of it was about the crisis.

Roy heard Olive whisper to George Watt, "Oh, yes, the meeting's still on. No, Jessup flatly refused to cancel. He wouldn't. It's not like him."

George, who only had a walk-on part, whispered back something about, "Yeah, I'll have time. Sure, I will. Old lady Sorenson won't miss me here." It sounded like he had a plan



to skip out and attend at least part of the meeting.

Several other people asked about the meeting, and Olive found time to whisper the latest dope to each one of them. Significantly, there were not quite as many people on hand as normally. All the actors were there, but the script girl and the door watcher were absent. Roy noticed that Mr. McKay, for some reason, did not drop in to see how things were going. Perhaps he really had a little boy who was sick. These small changes in routine tended to throw the actors for a loss. Many were flubbing their lines or else walking through them abstractly.

Miss Sorenson did not let things drift out of hand very long. By seven-thirty she found time to slip in a pep talk. It was amazing the discipline this woman could inspire without raising her voice. Never did she say, "Don't whisper". Rather, she put the matter positively. "Concentrate. While you're not on stage clear your mind of distractions by thinking of something pleasant, even something childishly escapist. Imagine you're down at the sea shore. A warm sunset. You're about to jump in the golden tinted waters. Then you imagine what your character would do at the beach, how he would jump in the waves. Then gradually you are your character. As him you are letting the foamy crests break over you. Concentrate."

By now, if they had time to peak outside, they could see groups of students walking across the campus all headed toward the men's gymnasium. Once someone opened the unguarded side door to the backstage area and they heard a chorus enthusiastically chanting, "We want Schein". Off in the distance someone echoed the same sentiment. By tonight the kids were really keyed up. As eight o'clock neared the excitement

seemed to seep inside the auditorium. Roy was finding it more and more difficult to keep his mind on his part.

Sometime after eight o'clock they got through rehearsing the scene Roy was in, and as soon as he was off stage he hurried to a telephone. The nearest one, if he did not want to use the pay phone in the lobby, was in the basement near the janitor's closet. Not even the janitor was on duty tonight. He hadn't so much as showed up to turn on the lights, and the whole area below stage was dark. On the stairway Roy found one switch and clicked it. But it only snapped on a bulb inside the broom closet itself. As for lighting up the basement it shed only two pale streaks, one between door and floor, the other through a crack in the closet's venelator.

This was enough for him to find the phone, and by now he had memorized Donald Sprague's number. Again the busy signal went on as soon as he had dialed it.

Roy got worried. Why an unbroken series of busy signals? Could the man be so rushed that he was answering the phone until well into evening? Or had he, during the University crisis, left his phones off the hook because he didn't want to take on any clients who might be mixed up in the controversy? It looked like he was going to have to forget about hiring an attorney. Yes, he could find the names of dozens of others in the telephone directory. But would they handle his case? Would they be sympathetic to his plight? He might be wasting his father's twenty-five dollars--if his father should happen to come through with it.

The situation boiled down to this--if "John", who must be Jim Griswald, had squealed to the authorities then Roy was in

trouble for sure. If he had not the case against him might not be very strong. Oh yes, they probably had a recording of what went on. That could be bad because both he and John had talked plenty. He needed to see a lawyer and find out if they could stick him on just the strength of a recorded conversation. Pictures would certainly be much worse. But how could they have taken pictures? Roy didn't believe they had. And then there was the point of his being only seventeen. If they were going to railroad someone out of town it ought to be the partner who admitted to fifty-eight years. And just this afternoon the partner was walking around, completely at liberty, and didn't show the slightest fear of being picked up for a thing.

If he couldn't get ahold of a lawyer he'd better try to track down Jim Griswald. Even if it meant getting into hot water to do so, he'd better find the man.

Luck still was not with him when he dialed Larry Thorpe's phone. Larry himself didn't answer. Again it was Georgia. "Georgia," he said, "Could you please tell me how to get ahold of Mr. Griswald? Something important has come up?"

"Important? About that package? Listen Roy your fretting over nothing. There can't be anything important in that package even if Jim dropped it. Why on earth do you keep calling my number? What's the matter with you? My land, I've never seen a kid get as worked up as you are." She had gotten nasty right off.

"I can't tell you over the phone what's wrong, but believe me something important's come up. I don't want to talk to your

husband, (again he was speaking something less than the unvarnished truth) I just want to talk to this Griswald fellow for a minute. I'm not going to pester you at all. Just tell me how I can get ahold of him."

"How do I know how to get ahold of Larry's boss? I don't know anything about my husband's business. I know I'm not supposed to ~~contact~~ him while he's at work. If you've got to find him so bad you'd better call the police. They're supposed to find missing people, not me."

"Please, Mrs. Thorpe. You know you're not supposed to bother the police with a little matter like finding someone you've seen only once. Would you do me a favor? Would you just ask your husband if he knows how to get ahold of Mr. Griswald? You don't have to call him to the phone. Just ask him."

"Larry isn't in yet. He works nights."

"But he works day time too. When does he sleep?"

"Now listen here, you're not to bother in our private affairs. It's none of your business when he sleeps. I'm--I'm sorry to get firm with you, but I just have to. My children are sleeping. We're busy here. Don't call--"

Before she could finish the sentence he butted in. If he waited until she was finished she might hang up. "--Could I come out to your place tonight and talk to your husband? What time does he get in?"

This bothered her. "Come out here?" she asked. "What for?"

"I told you it was an important matter."

For a minute she didn't say anything. It's possible she had cupped her hand over the receiver during the pause. "Well," she said at last, "if it's as big a rush as all that you can go

to this place. Have you got a pencil? Well, I think you know--yes, I know you know about the area out by the lake? It's out close to the air base. Well, this place is on Miller Road. You've heard of that, haven't you?"

No. Roy had not.

"You haven't heard of Miller Road? Everybody knows where that is."

Roy pointed out that he would have to take a city bus to the address, and it would be late at night before he could get started. "Isn't there a phone number where I can reach him?" he asked.

"I told you I don't know anything about Jim's phone numbers. This address is 4528 Miller Road. It's a little white stucco house with a funny looking fence around it. That's all I know, Goodbye."

This time she clicked the receiver so quickly after her "Goodbye" that there was no time for Roy to draw her into further revelations. Any way, he now had something concrete to work on. If only he had more time. But if worse should come to worst he could spend the whole night getting ready for tomorrow's session with the dean.

As he went back to the stage he felt better. Yes, he had yet to face many problems. The scariest was he might be invading the world of narcotics. If what he had read was true he could get "rubbed out" at any moment.

No, he had no proof that Larry Thorpe nor any of his circle was mixed up with dope. Roy's only known contact with that sinister world had been Mrs. Laudermilch's statement that the package Dolores had given him was dope of some sort. Yes, there was also the business of Malcolm Fox being the brunt of Thorpe's accident,

and Fox was supposed to be an addict. But all these connections were shadowy rumors. Oh yes, if he let his imagination run wild he could speculate that either Larry or Georgia wanted to break into his room at Mrs. Lauder Milch's and get that package. Again small packages. He himself did not know what was in them.

He had to make a brief entrance on stage. Then he was off again and had several more minutes to kill before he must reappear. Out front the auditorium looked dark and deserted. The best he could make out not even Dol Abbol was there. Did her absence mean she was having a last fling with Beulah before Beulah left?

He wandered out into the auditorium and settled down in a seat mid-ways back and tried to concentrate. While he had his eyes closed in an effort to clear his mind someone sat down beside him.

How inconsiderate. A fellow actor certainly should know better than to annoy a performer trying to concentrate. After all, there were plenty of other vacant seats in the vast auditorium. He would keep his eyes closed and ignore whoever it was.

Whoever it was kept sitting there in a strangely still, quiet way. Something was wrong with that. Another actor, if there was one so rude as to interrupt his reverie, would be nudging him on the shoulder trying to start a conversation. Maybe he had better take a look.

A girl, or rather a young woman, was sitting there looking straight at him. A smile played over her exquisitely curved lips. This was no student, but an outsider who had wandered into the auditorium while the door-watcher was at the meeting.

Roy almost exclaimed aloud, what a beautiful girl. No, she was not just pretty. Nor was she a half-done teen-ager

with the promise of future voluptuousness. She was beauty already arrived, a strangely familiar beauty.

Roy gasped. He realized he was looking at his own sister, Rena.

When the signs of recognition swept his face Rena burst out laughing. "It took you long enough to notice me," she said. "I thought you were in a trance. Say, I've been watching some of your thing up there on the stage. You're doing real well, another Barrymore."

"Rena!" he said. He must look at her, and he did so with mouth wide open. She seemed the very embodiment of self-confidence, of fresh, unmarred radiance. How could he tell a woman like her that she wasn't supposed to be in here? Why should she care about the drama department's being death on visiting relatives? What would she care about the hard and fast rule that they must wait and see the public performance? "I've-- I've only got a minute before I go on again. But--but if we hurry we can talk. Let's go some where where we can talk."

"What's wrong with right here?" Rena asked.

"We're--you're not supposed to be in the auditorium--"

"Oh, pooh."

Roy had to giggle at such a display of composure. But somehow he must make her understand that the department's rules were very strict. "Miss Sorenson, the one sitting on the front row. She'll, well, she'll have a fit."

"You mean that washed out blonde who talks like she has a hot potatoe in her mouth? I've already chatted with her."

Again Roy gasped. A stranger like Rena had actually persuaded the directoress to break a rule. "How--how did you get



here? I mean, how did you find your way to our rehearsals? Where's your husband? Hollis isn't going to come in here too, is he?"

Rena answered part of these questions with a wave of her pretty hand. "I just asked. Everybody fell all over themselves to show me to the right place. They always do. Hollis is sitting out in the turn-around. We had a little trouble getting permission to drive on campus. Once here he said he didn't want to move. The fact is I couldn't drag him away from the radio. We've got a short wave in our new Buick. Hollis had it installed so he could kill time painlessly while I'm gadding about. Your sister is horrible about making him wait hours and hours."

"I'm so glad to see you," Roy said truthfully. Rena's smile seemed to melt away half of his troubles, just like they were out in the pasture making daisy chains again.

"A comfortable little place you've got here," she said looking up at the auditorium's vaulted ceiling. "Cute little chandeliers." She patted the cover on the seat next to her. "Plush is alright, but there's not much in the way of springs underneath it. But I think Hollis and I will like it in Fort Boomer. How long are you going to be tied up tonight?"

From the action on stage Roy knew he was only three or four speeches from his next entrance. "A long time. Where can I meet you when it's over?"

"When what's over?"

"The rehearsals. We're always late getting out. Ten-thirty. Maybe eleven. And tonight this meeting is going on--"

"Meeting?"

How could he explain about the university crisis in a split



second? "It's a real rushed night tonight--"

"Well, don't let it get you down," she said.

"I mean I'm about on stage. I'll meet you at the turn-around at ten-thirty. You don't have to wait out there that long, but please show up then. It's so nice to see you. You can tell me all about how you got to Fort Boomer, how long you're going to be here--"

"Oh, we're going to be stationed here," she said. "By 'here' I mean right here at the University. A new project Armed Services has got started. Hollis will be shrinking heads a block off campus. A new psychology clinic that will be installed in an old rest home, the Air Force and University sharing costs. Why don't I drag Hollis in here, and the two of us watch you do your stuff?"

"That would be pushing your luck entirely too far. Miss Sorenson would never allow that."

"Oh very well," she said. "I see that old girl's got you on the run. At ten-thirty in the turn-around. We'll go for a late snack at some nice restaurant."

"Snack?" Roy asked. "No, I can't. Not tonight."

"Not even after your precious rehearsals are out of the way? Ten-thirty isn't late. We'll have so many things to talk about."

"I'm--I'm on stage. See you at ten-thirty."

"Ten-thirty," she said. "Ta-ta."

Did he really perform better when he got on stage? Roy felt he did, and Miss Sorenson commented in her restrained way that he was "fine". Rena here. Suddenly dropping in to the holy of holies, wrecking his concentration. And still he per-

formed above par. If McKay were here he would tell him out right that neither concentration exercises nor yoga were what they were cracked up to be. A visit from a sister you haven't seen in a year and a half does a better job.

Those were his thoughts at nine-thirty. At ten Mr. McKay did show up. For this late hour drop-in he was still well-dressed. Gone were the summery stripes of the afternoon. Now he wore a warm brown gabardine and a green sport shirt without tie. Either the man spent a lot on clothes or he was good at varying basic pieces with clever accessories.

Roy was first aware of his presence while on-stage. Though he dare not break character and look out front<sup>forward</sup> he sensed some sort of unusual reaction out there. As soon as he was off into the wings he glanced out to the front row. Miss Sorenson was not leaning forward, enthralled with the action on stage, she was whispering with Mr. McKay. What he had to tell her must have been upsetting because she kept glancing, not toward center stage, but over in the dimly lit wings where Roy had just made his exit. Maybe she was trying to get a look at him.

His re-entrance cue came up. He was on-stage again before he managed to catch Miss Sorenson's eye. When he came off Oswald McKay was backstage. How much should you read into a mere glance? How reliable are the various meanings you put into slithery looks when your eyes meet someone elses? From the way McKay's eyeballs behaved during the several times that he looked at Roy it was impossible to come to any conclusions. Supposedly he had dropped backstage to chat with Inez or maybe just any of the off-stage cast. It certainly did not seem that

he had made a trip to the wings especially to talk to the Grover kid. When Roy first saw him he was joking with Mae. Then he pinched Inez. Both activities were against the rules. An off-stage actor should be concentrating. Once McKay's eyes made a hundred and eighty degree arc and his line of vision crossed Roy in the process. No one would ever have thought that a few hours earlier the professor had been giving that kid over there some confidential advice. The youngster some ten feet distant might have been someone he had seen a time or two but had never formally met. Suddenly McKay's eyes broke away from Inez and went back to Roy. He closed his eyelids, and when he re-opened them he was looking at Roy. He looked at Mae. He looked at Roy. He looked at Inez. He looked at Roy.

He had made the two girls giggle, a shameful breach of rules on all three of them's part. His feet would not stay still. No matter which way he was looking his body kept turning to Roy.

What should Roy do? It looked like McKay wanted to talk to him and didn't know how to get himself un-stuck from the girls. Yet, he might have fallen into a state of regret about his mid-afternoon burst of confidential advice. You couldn't tell. Maybe he didn't want to see Grover at all.

Roy had one last entrance before rehearsals would be over. Some how he still managed to keep up his first rate performance. When he made his exit neither Inez, nor Mae, nor McKay were around. Miss Sorenson was clapping her hands to call the cast on stage for her critique of the evening's work. What had happened to McKay? And why should Roy worry about that man at all?

Roy's eyes were looking right and left. The professor might be closeted with one of the actor's some where. Ah, there he

was, coming out from a dressing room, rubbing his hands as though he might have just eaten a candy bar and was brushing away the crumbs. He did not look at Roy.

That made no difference. No matter if he had to miss the directoress's critique he was going to talk to McKay. About mid-way to the dressing room the professor finally looked up and saw him.

"Ah, Roy. You did well tonight."

"I couldn't get ahold of Sprague. My sister has showed up. Marion Tolliver has been pestering me all day--"

"Did you get--well, get anything from the dean?"

"Of course I did," said Roy.

"Ah well," said McKay. More of a statement than a question.

"It was a postcard."

"A post card." Again a statement, not a question..

"Yes," said Roy.

"And your sister is here?"

"Yes," said Roy. This afternoon McKay had been eager to spill out advice, but now he was fidgeting from one foot to the other. He was still wiping his hands. Just what had been on them Roy had no idea.

"And that was your brother-in-law parked out in the turn-around, wasn't it? Well, of course it was. I talked to him. I even invited him inside to take a glimpse of the rehearsal. But he refused. He said he was busy. Ah yes, it's nice to have-- to have your relatives here at a time like this. You won't need my very poor advice, will you? Your brother-in-law said he was a psychiatrist in civilian life--"

"I don't want my family to know anything about this."

"This?"

The professor was being so difficult. Roy had already gone far enough to lure a really sympathetic person into filling in the unstated things by himself. He had hoped that, by now, McKay would be bubbling out more instructions, more details about contacting a lawyer, more inside dope on what the dean was going to spring on him tomorrow. Instead the man was nervously shifting from one foot to the other.

"Mr. McKay. I don't want to get into trouble with the dean. I don't think I've done anything to get into trouble about. What's going to happen to me tomorrow? What did they do to Tolliver?"

McKay quit fidgeting. He put his hand across his lips as though he were trying to seal them up. Finally, he said, "They talked Tolliver into joining the navy."

"I don't understand," said Roy. "Marion told me he had already joined up when he went to the dean's office. And what has that got to do with me? I'm not of the draft age. I'm seventeen."

"The dean had called Tolliver in a time or two before. And you're seventeen. It--it might be best if you'd join up too."

"No. I won't."

"Why not?" said McKay. But the question was a weak one. Weak or strong, Roy didn't know how to answer it. How could he explain that the service seemed terrifying? When they put that uniform on you, then you were forced to be something--someone--that you absolutely were not. Roy would have to drop his own being completely, and for the duration of the war be another

entity, one that he despised. Either that, or he would have to remain a mis-fit, with his uniform a mockery, and all the other soldiers laughing at him, picking on him. Could he last through a long war an obvious outcast like that? He felt he could not, and he felt that McKay should understand his plight. Since he was an older man he should be able to give advice. After all, he was not yet sucked into uniform himself. Surely he knew a trick or two that would be useful to Roy.

McKay seemed to be looking up toward the ceiling, the hand was still over his lips.

"Olive is a nice girl, isn't she?"

"Olive?" Had Roy guessed right? Was McKay suggesting he, at the age of seventeen, marry in order to duck out of the service? It wouldn't keep him out if he did. Married men, if they weren't fathers, were drafted every day. Any moment the president might announce that fathers would go in. Couldn't McKay give any better advice than that?

The professor seemed to have guessed Grover's line of thinking. "I know that if you should become attached to some girl and get married you would still go into the service. But, Roy, you may be in worse trouble than that. The dean has just told me that he can't let you continue on in this play, that we'll have to find a substitute. You might even be expelled. The newspapers might get ahold of it, and what chances would you have as an actor if it should be a public record that you--well, that you liked men? Seventeen is young. But sometimes we are forced to grow up before our time."

"No. No. I won't get married," said Roy.

"Then maybe your brother-in-law can help you out. When I

talked to him he seemed like a sensible fellow. About Sprague. I'm not surprised that you couldn't get ahold of him. Someone else told me the same thing. He must have skipped out. Roy, certain politicians are out to make an example of somebody. You don't want to get caught up in it. You'd better take all precautions to protect yourself. I--I don't know what you've done. Maybe, as you say, it's nothing. But let me tell you, you'd better play it smart. I'm afraid I won't be able to stand up for you. Miss Sorenson knows that something is wrong. She doesn't know exactly what, or at least she claims she doesn't. When I talked to her just now she agreed to get someone else to take your part. I hate to see this happen. I wish there were some way I could help you."

McKay reached out and put his hand on Roy's shoulder. It was a nice gesture since, at the moment, Grover was dumbfounded. "I guess--I guess I'm going to have to look after myself," Roy said.

"No, I wouldn't try to go it alone if I were you. If things get too bad, come around and talk to me. There's not much I can do. I can't afford to make a public display of protecting you. You say you don't want to tell your family. I think it might be smart if you did. It would be better if you told them than if they read it in the papers. Maybe everything will blow over, and nothing will happen to you. Let's hope it turns out that way. Don't worry about it tonight. Just remember, don't admit a thing that you don't have to. Remember the college has to prove everyone of their accusations if they let anything out to the press. They can get rid of you without iron clad proof, but they can't make anything public. Play it

smart. Try to keep as much of your reputation as you can. Rugger really isn't a bad sort. It's just that he can't stand up to the pressure that's being put on him. He has to find a scapegoat. If you show you've got a cool head and don't try to antagonize him too much he may let you off easy and pick on someone else. Let's hope so. Good luck to you. Remember you're not pushed out of anything yet except the play. Frankly I think it's a lousey little pot-boiler. Still I'm sorry to have to replace you. The best of everything to you."

Roy had to get out of there. Any minute Miss Sorenson might break off her critique to come over and say she was "so terribly sorry" he must be replaced. Sympathy he could not stand, at least not the kind that was motivated by the rules of etiquette. Also, if Hollis Pease and Rena were waiting outside, as his sister promised, they might come barging into the auditorium. If rehearsals were over, why not? They would probably barge into someone's sympathy speech. They might demand to know what it was all about. Right now he didn't want to have to explain anything to them. It would be bad enough choosing his own time to break the news. Perhaps, if he worked it right, he could get by with telling them only that he was no longer in the play. Maybe he could keep the rest secret. After all, he hardly knew his brother-in-law, Hollis. And it had been five--or was it six years?--since he had been close to Rena. Parts of her must be very strange to him. Yes, he wanted out of the auditorium.

Outside in the turn-around the campus's street lights illuminated an expensive looking new car. The gloss on its light colored enamel glistened even in the semi-darkness. New



cars were hard to get. People pulled all sorts of wires to work up the necessary priority to buy them.

Inside, two dark forms were leisurely and elegantly reclining against soft looking seats. The car windows were rolled down. Faint, tastefully faint, music drifted out, and the smell of fresh blooming crepe myrtle must have been drifting inside. A perfect way to relax in the perfumes of a perfect spring night. Clearly, the two poised forms were in no hurry. No wonder Rena did not consider 10:30 a late hour. Such a high-living girl would not want to deprive her senses of night's delicate nuances.

As soon as Hollis Pease saw Roy--he was sitting in the driver's seat--he came to life like an athlete whose time had come to run the hundred yard dash. Without getting out of the car, or really moving a great deal on his thick pile cushion, he got genuine sparkling warmth in the re-meeting with his brother-in-law. His hand-shake, though not bone crushing, shocked you with its strength. When he spoke the conventional phrases, "Greet to see you again. My, you're in top form," his voice purred with the low vibrant quality associated with masculine strength and sex appeal. All this came from a man who was a little bit on the small side. Rena was, perhaps, a half inch taller than he, and while both of them were exquisitely proportioned, he was a tiny bit too thin to be a Greek god model.

"How are you?" he asked without really expecting an answer. "Exciting times you have here tonight. Rena and I have been laughing at these young sprouts with wild looks in their eyes trooping past our windows. Half of them are carrying bed rolls as though it were fun. Put them in the service and they'll get enough of bivouacking fast. I suppose they're actually going to

sleep out on the administration building's lawn. Of course, you've heard this fellow Jessup has pushed the student body into what he calls a strike. He won't get by with it. By ten o'clock tomorrow the whole lot of them will be back in class. My, but you have filled out. I hardly recognized you here in the dark. Rena tells me you show up well on the stage. Great. The toaster is a great ego builder. Speaking in public does wonderful things for the voice. Well, let's blast off to some place and get ourselves around a mid-night snack."

By a wave of the hand he intimated he wanted Roy to sit in the back seat. In fact his wave of the hand seemed to settle many things. Roy was not to be invited inside for a ride. Why waste time? Kid brothers always wanted to try out new cars. He would not be asked what he thought of a mid-night snack. Adolescent relatives couldn't resist impulsive splurges at unconventional hours. It only remained for Roy to get in so they could get started.

It was true Roy could not resist getting into the new car. By the end of Hollis's speech he was already half in the back seat. But he stopped before he was really relaxed on the soft cushion.

"I--I just remembered," he said. "I can't go any where. I'll have to go to my room."

"Don't be foolish," said Rena. "There's nothing to do in your room. We dropped in there before we came up to the auditorium."

"You went to my room? Then maybe you saw it. A--a friend of mine was threatening to move in a lot of crates. He's joining the navy, or being drafted into it, or something. Were

a bunch of boxes scattered over the room?"

Hollis already had the car--it was a Buick--in motion. While he had started off the conversation with an easy flow of words he now let Rena do most of the talking. Roy's sister said they had met someone carrying a trunk into his room.

"--Not a bunch of crates. A metal thing. Like a foot locker. I didn't like the guy's looks. A tall drink of water. Funny way of spitting out words. Is that the way they're making you talk in this drama stuff? One foot locker can't put you in much of a tizzy. So we'll forget it. Don't you have to turn left, Dear?"

"It doesn't matter, Sweet," Hollis said to his wife. The Buick was now on the south side of the auditorium where the driveway forked. A stream of students, many of them carrying bedding, were meandering across both forks.. You could see where they were going. To the right, on the front lawn of the Ad building, were visible signs of the "strike". Maybe as many as three hundred students were milling around in desultory groups, some on the grass, some on the steps. On the plaza between the steps and the front door some boys were trying to set up a tent. Other youngsters with a microphone were putting up a speaker system. Jessup must have delivered a stirring call to "strike". Doubtlessly, none of the board of regents showed up to answer whatever questions he planned to pelt them with, and now the combination "walk-out" and "sit-in" was on.

Since cars were rarely permitted on campus most of the students looked at the Buick with wild frowns. Roy was half afraid one of them might throw a rock. Hollis and Rena, however, were perfectly calm. Both knew exactly what to do with wild

frowns. They smiled at them. As though they were following a previously rehearsed drill both leaned their heads out their respective windows and glowed with understanding smiles. The glow was strong enough to carry quite well through the artificial rays of the street lamps. Hollis went even further and waved one of his hands in a sort of benediction. Their routine worked wonders. Not only did the frowns melt away, but several of the students waved back at Hollis. Instead of strangers they and Dr. Pease might have been brethern in the same fraternal bund.

"But if we go right we'll run across that campus guard again," said Rena. "We promised him we'd be parked only a minute, and it's been hours."

"Fraidy cat," said Hollis as he reached out to pinch her with a friendly tweak. His other hand was still waving, and at the moment he pinched the car was left to procede with no hand on the wheel. It didn't matter. Obviously, Hollis was already at one with his new car.

They turned right and kept their heads tilted out their windows beaming their magic smiles. At the other side of the Administration building they reached the campus guard's kiosk. The guard took one look at their smiles and waved them on out to Vaca Street.

Rena relaxed on the velour upholstery and let her permanented waves fan out over the cushion. Without bothering to sigh in relief she picked up where she had broken off with Roy.

"What was in the foot locker?" she asked. "And why do you have to move it out?"

"He's joining the navy," said Roy.

"So what?"

"He's moving in his whole phonograph collection with me. I can't let him get by with it. Maybe it was only a foot locker when you were there, but by now he must have dumped a warehouse full of things."

The words "can't let him get by with it" seemed to bother Dr. Pease. He broke his silence and echoed, "'Can't let him get by with it'? Do you have trouble saying 'no' to people, Roy?"

Roy feared he might be maneuvered into defeat. Under no conditions must he be side-tracked into some philosophical argument. And above all he must not let these two tie him up tonight. Of course, the business about Tolliver's crates was nothing more than an excuse. As soon as possible he must catch the city bus and make his way out to Miller Road. Some how he must find Jim Griswald at home. What a shame he must slight Rena and Hollis. Ordinarily a reunion with them would, indeed, be an occasion for celebration. But tonight he simply could not waste hours entertaining them.

"I tell you what. Let's go up to my room and see how much he has moved in," he said.

"I noticed you didn't answer my question about saying 'no' to people," said Hollis. "Is this tall fellow we met bothering you?"

Why must his brother-in-law be such a nit-picker? But he must not let his digging little questions get under his skin. Roy stood his ground and demanded they drop by his room before they went out any where.

"If there aren't any crates up there I'll go out with you. If my room's crammed full, I'm sorry, but I'll have to drop you tonight. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day, and I'll

have to get this crate business settled tonight."

"I see," said Hollis.

The 'I see' was said so easily and pleasantly that it surprised Roy. But once Pease gave in the surrender of his cause was complete. Never while he drove over to the boarding house did he try to needle Grover again. There was too much to say, too many gaps in the family history which they had to piece together.

It turned out that Hollis preferred to be called "Captain" instead of "Doctor". "After all," he said, "I'm in the service and quite proud of it. If anything I feel the title, 'Captain', is more of an honor than the rather prissy sounding 'Doctor'". Hollis's army uniform was very becoming to him. But Pease had an air about him that commanded attention and would have done so no matter what he might have been wearing.

"Old Cliff is not doing so well," he said. "Health Problems. The sad part about it is he can't bring himself around to believing that it's psychological. But he's in good hands." At this point Hollis revealed that, just last month, he had caught a ride on an Air Force courier flight to California. While there he had seen and talked both to Clifford and his doctors. "Those fellows at the base were genuinely advanced thinkers. Their ability to see all aspects of Cliff's problem impressed me. Whatever it takes to straighten him out I'm sure they'll give it a try. Blanche, by the way, gave her best regards to you, Roy. She's fitting into army life quite well. Better than her husband. Blanche has got an emergency relief program set up practically all by herself. It's for dependents--wives and children. Nice chatting with her."

Hollis had been around a great deal. It seemed that a captain in the medical corp didn't have anything like the difficulty in moving about that a civilian had. Between his duties at the Army hospital near Oklahoma City Pease had also found time to catch a special air force flight down to Rayo. A staff car had taken him up to Gloriona. Only last Thursday he had lunched with Pattie herself.

"Your mother is doing quite well. If she'd stick to her diet I'm sure she'd show up even better than she does. A trifle over weight. But on the whole I must say she's quite well. She sent a 'hello' to you. You know, in my little hops here and there, I can't help but be impressed with how well this country is doing. We're really getting down to winning this war. Amazing. A year ago most of us were a bunch of farmers at heart. We had no idea what was to face us just around the corner. But in the past few months we've seen what had to be done, and we're doing it. I'm proud of the way America is getting down to business. Ah well, that's enough of the flag waving. Seldom pop off that way."

At the boarding house both Hollis and Rena accompanied Roy upstairs to his room. The door was wide open as it usually was in warm weather. His roommate, with radio turned on softly, was working trigonometry problems. Theirs was a fairly large room like most rooms in the older houses, and the gray aluminum foot locker placed against one wall was hardly noticeable.

Roy was surprised. "Only one?" he asked.

His roommate assured him the tall fellow had brought up only one item. Roy kicked at it. Rather light. Too light to hold all of Tolliver's operatic collection even if he could have

sandwiched them all into so small a space.

"He must have left some downstairs," said Roy. But Mrs. Sollers swore that his friend had brought only the one suitcase. A quick look in the student directory and Roy had Tolliver's phone number. He must find out for sure what had happened to his erratic acquaintance. But no one answered when Grover telephoned him.

As he listened to the unanswered buzzing Roy thought fast. With only one modest sized piece of luggage in his room he had no crate moving problem. He had no excuse to beg off from a late snack with Rena and Hollis. Right now they were standing by the bannister charming Mr. and Mrs. Sollers with pleasant talk. Something about Armed Services putting them up in the Palace Hotel until they could rent a house. They weren't even settled in Fort Boomer. It would be terrible to snub his own sister the minute she had gotten into town. Over on the campus they had been so patient to wait out in the turn-around until he had finished rehearsals. They must have refused quite a number of very promising invitations from their Army contacts just to be with him tonight. .

Nevertheless, he had to get away from them and get out to Miller Road.

"Hello," he said into the phone's series of unanswered ringing signals. How fortunate that Hollis and Rena could not tell what he was hearing through the receiver. "Hello, Marion. I thought I'd never get you. You are? When? How many? Could I help you out? You say it will take most of the night? Alright, I'll be over." When he hung up the receiver he cut short one of the ringing signals.



It turned out to be rather easy to wiggle out of the Pease's invitation. Roy told them the story that Tolliver was snowed under packing. "After all he is going into the service. We didn't know each other very well. But you know how it is. You want to help out when someone's joining up."

The Pease's seemed to understand. And when Roy promised to call them early tomorrow morning and have breakfast with them at the Palace Hotel they agreed it was a good idea to forget about tonight's spree.

"It would be so nice to go for a little fling tonight," said Rena. "Because we haven't seen each other for so long. But if you've got the guts to try to drag me out of bed in time for breakfast tomorrow well then, I'll let you go to it. Heaven's knows we're going to have a full day of it trying to find a decent house to live in. Have you been out to Blanche's old home lately? Is their little house rented? What sort of place is that River Terrace? Oh well, we'll let you go. Be a good little Boy Scout for that fellow who's about to go in. Though from what I saw of him we'd be better off if he would join the Japs. Well. Good night. Oh by the way. Could we drive you over to this fellow's house? Does he live some where close to the way to the Palace Hotel? You know where the Palace is don't you?"

Yes, Roy told her he knew where the Palace was, and he added that Tolliver lived in the opposite direction. Involuntarily, he yawned while he was talking. It was not a put-on act to hurry them on their way. Unfortunately, he was really getting sleepy.

He had to wait thirty minutes at the downtown transfer point before the night bus for Miller Road came along. The transfer point was only two blocks south of the Palace Hotel. Its twelve stories towered above the surrounding business houses. As he waited he watched the various lights in the Hotel's upper floors snap out one by one. Gradually, the guests were calling it a night. Naturally, he wondered if one of the windows which he could see might open into Rena's and Hollis's room. Could they see him two blocks down standing in a shadowy recess of a dimly lit building? Of course they couldn't. Neither would they have any idea that he knew at least one of the rooms in the Palace quite well. By chance could they be staying in the same room where he had shacked up with Griswald? Highly unlikely.

Thank heavens it was a warm night. The trip out to Miller Road turned out to be a long one. As the bus went further and further out the scattered few passengers kept getting off until, finally, Roy was the only rider left. He had been carefully noting the names of the streets ever since they got out of the downtown area. But as the bus got further out in the suburbs he began to wonder if he had missed Miller Road. He must ask the bus driver.

"Miller Road?" the driver said puckering his eyebrows.

"Yes," said Roy. "Remember I asked you to let me off there when I got on the bus downtown."

The driver, who was an older fellow, probably a retiree who had been called back to driving when a younger man was drafted, wiggled impatiently in his seat. It made Roy uneasy because he remembered this man had nodded rather mechanically downtown

when he had asked about the address.

"Miller Road," the old man mused. "Miller Road. You just want the Road or you want a special place on it?"

"I want a house. Number 4528. It's a small white stucco house. Some kind of fence is around it."

They ain't many houses out there," he said. "That place runs by the cemetery. You say you want number 4528? There ain't many house numbers out there either. 4528. Well, you keep your eye peeled out, and so will I. Here's Miller Road right around this turn."

Roy felt a little sick. This old man must be mistaken. A cemetery. Damn that Georgia if she had pulled a dirty trick on him. But she wouldn't do a thing like that. It was more likely that this old fart was blarney. If buses went out here there must be houses out here.

Mrs. Thorpe was not very bright. At least he hadn't sized her up as quick witted. To send him on a wild goose chase she would have had to think fast, and she had come right out with this address. Hadn't she? He couldn't remember exactly how his conversation with her had progressed except there had been a pause in it some where.

The bus turned a corner, and its lights showed up a winding road. On one side the limbs of oak trees almost scratched the top of the vehicle. Here and there through breaks in the foliage you could glimpse the glistening waves of the lake.

On the other side of the road the bus's lights caught the dark tracery of a wrought iron fence. Beyond it the pale moonlight illuminated rows of tombstones. Yes, they were passing a cemetery.

The driver looked at Roy strangely. He gripped and un-gripped the steering wheel. "This here place stretches on for quite a spell, and there ain't much on the other side of it. The end of the line's just up the road a piece."

Roy looked at the tombstones. They were passing the main gate which was now locked. Through the ornate portals Roy could see a small white house which might have been a caretaker's tool shed or it might have been sort of special family sepulcher.

"Is this what you want?" asked the driver.

"I--I wanted a number. A house with a number on it," said Roy.

"Suppose we stop here. Maybe there's a number around some place and you can get an idea what block we're in. There ain't nobody been pulling tricks on you, has there?"

A regular passenger car had more or less been following the city bus. As Roy walked across the road to get a closer look at the main gate its headlights caught him, and the car slowed down. By the time he was near enough to examine the stuccoed pillars of the entrance way the car had closed in the distance. It pulled off the road and stopped behind the bus.

"Roy, are you in trouble?"

The man driving the car had called to him. Just as Roy recognized his voice--it was Hollis's--he spotted the discreetly sized numbers beside the cemetery's iron gate. Number 4528.

"Roy, we've been following you." This second voice that called to him was Rena's. She was getting out of the far side of their shiny new Buick. "Is something wrong?"

"You know these people?" the bus driver called to Roy.

Two questions at once as well as being caught in his lie to the Pease's. Roy did not have time to think. And so he made his first mistake. He called out to the bus driver, "Yes, they're relatives. Thank you."

The bus driver immediately put his vehicle in gear and pulled off. In no time at all the receding taillights shrunk to two pin points in the moonlit night. Grover was left alone with his relatives and their new Buick. By now he was wishing he had not been so quick to tell the truth to the driver. If he had said, 'No, I've never seen them before', he could have gotten back back on to the bus and under the protection of the City Transit System. Now, unless some miracle happened, he would either have to walk back to town or ride back, practically a captive, with the couple he had just lied to.

Both of them stayed relaxed on the front seat of their car and did all their talking with elbows casually draped out their open windows. They seemed welded to that car. Didn't they ever walk any where? Didn't they ever get out just to stretch their legs and put their muscles to their natural uses?

The way they reacted also threw Roy off balance. If the sight of a deserted cemetery alarmed them they didn't show it. Nor if being the brunt of a dingy white lie nettled them they showed no sign of that. It seemed they were going to laugh it off. Pease's deep chuckle mingled with Rena's musical ha-ha's.

"Aha, you hound," said Rena. "Caught you sucking eggs, didn't we? So, you're going to pack records in the cemetery. Chopin's Funeral March?"

"Get in," said Hollis. "You can tell us all about it on the way back to town."

The invitation was too easy, and Roy knew it. It smelled of soft soap and banana oil. He tried to get independent and refuse. No, no... He would ride back to town on the bus. The end of the line was only around the bend. City transportation would be back in five minutes.

They also laughed at this idea. Rena called that it must be chilly out there. "You'll need at least a bed sheet to keep warm." Her melodious laughter after this pun warmed up the already warm night.

Roy tried to turn the tables on them and point out that they had no business following him like sneaking divorce lawyers looking for evidence. If he wanted to get rid of them he would get rid of them one way or another. If they couldn't take a hint to leave him alone they deserved to hear lies.

"But we didn't want to leave you this alone," said Rena waving toward the tombstones. "If you want to be alone, try a Greta Garbo movie, not the cemetery."

Very well. He would ride back to town with them. But his business was his business. He didn't want to be asked questions. He didn't want anyone prying into his private life.

"Just as you say," said Rena.

But on the way back to town they did not drop the subject as flatly as they promised. With Roy sitting uncomfortably on the edge of the back seat they kept bringing up little questions. Most of them were about "that tall fellow" they had seen bringing in the foot locker.

"We noticed when we followed you that you didn't make an attempt to go by his living quarters. Don't you think you ought to investigate him? It's nothing but common sense. You expected

him to show up with several crates. Instead there's only one container that doesn't have the feel of phonograph records. Common sense, Roy. Investigate. We don't want to know why you went out to the cemetery if you don't want to tell us. But use common sense. Let's go by that man's place."

"No. I've been at his apartment once before. I don't need to go again." Roy did not say that his visit had been at another address from Marion's present residence and had taken place months ago.

"Then let's look into the footlocker. Let's open it up."

Again Roy could not think fast enough. He found himself agreeing to follow this advice without qualifying it. And when he got around to changing the "let's" part to just him, alone, Pease pointed out he was again being illogical.

"It's not your property. You need witnesses when you open it. We're only trying to help you out."

Although Roy was suspicious of the phrase, "trying to help you out", he was beginning to see some light at the end of the tunnel. This man was a psychiatrist, or something like that. That meant he had heard weird stories from all sorts of screw balls. No matter what he told him he should not be shocked.

It might be smart to let him in on at least part of his problem, the part about being summonsed to the dean's office. He could pretend he had no idea why. As a psychiatrist Pease would be bound by his professional code to keep his mouth shut and not reveal confidences even to his wife. Roy must find some way to leave Rena out of this.

Hollis dropped several more phrases which Grover realized were skillfully inserted. But they had their effect. "Probably

nothing to get your parents mixed up in. But it's sensible to look gift horses in the mouth". And, "You seem to be doing so well in your studies. That fellow who talked to us back at the turn-around said so. You'll want to stay on the right course." It was true. Roy wanted neither his parents nor Mr. McKay to know what might be in the footlocker.

Roy also played his part skillfully. Instead of caving in with an "Alright, we'll do it", he just quit resisting their nagging and kept his mouth shut. Soon they drove up to the boarding house, now completely dark, and parked at the curb. Roy sat in the back seat saying and doing nothing. This left it to Hollis to pose the question,

"Well, how about it? Do we go up with you?" Pease asked after several seconds silence.

"My roommate likes to sleep in the naw," said Grover. "Maybe Rena had better stay down here."

Rena, of course, guessed what his maneuver was and laughed at it. "I know when to take a hint. You'll find me down here listening to the one o'clock news when you get back. I'll keep the radio low."

The roommate was, indeed, sleeping in the nude and was only half covered up under a single bed sheet. Fortunately, he was a heavy sleeper and only grunted when the pair entered the room. Hollis's tip-toe was as light as a cat's. With hardly a whisper of sound he picked up the foot locker and carried it out to the stairs. Half way down them, where they made a turn, was the only light in the building. There a tiny base-board bulb illuminated the last step.

Roy had already discovered his brother-in-law was a re-



sourceful man. For one thing his clever tongue was most effective. Now he found out the man was just as deft with his hands. From his left shirt pocket Hollis produced a little black address book. For some reason certain of the pages were held together with a paper clip. Hollis was after the clip. In no time at all he had it unbent and one end inserted in a little slit between the lid and the lock hasp. He wasn't planning to flip off the hasp, just bend a hook in the end of the paper clip. When he got the hook turned at just the right angle he stuck it in the lock. All the time he was whistling a little tune between his teeth, a whistle so soft that Roy, standing shoulder to shoulder with him, could hardly hear it. With about two minute's work Hollis had the foot locker lid open.

The inside presented such a surprise that both men gasped. Even without feeling midst the wads of clothing they could tell they would find no phonograph records, no cloisonne vases, not even books.

What caught and held the eye were careless pink globs of silk and rayon. Anyone would know what they were, women's panties. Right in the middle the open work lace of a fancy brassiere stuck up through the hastily packed tangle. To make the scene even more embarrassing they did not see exclusively women's things. When they pawed a little bit they discovered it was all mixed up with men's clothing, some of it of the most intimate sort. They found a jockey strap, a wool shirt of army regulation color and design, a knit sweat shirt with "U.S. Marine Corps" stenciled on it and a pair of navy blue wool socks. In one corner they found a blue wool beret.

Suddenly, the blaze Captain Pease did an un-blaze thing. He snapped the lid shut as though he couldn't stand to see more. For a second he looked straight ahead with a gaze that saw nothing. Then he looked at Roy. There was no mistaking what his facial expression meant. He was horror struck.

"Rena," he whispered. "Don't you dare let Rena know anything about this."

Then he raised up and let his feet move cautiously as though he were afraid he might make some slight sound.

"Something's wrong," Roy started to say. "It's all--"

"Sh!" Pease said, and to make sure his brother-in-law obeyed his command he actually put his hand over Grover's mouth. Then he looked wildly about as though to detect the slightest sound or movement from the deep shadows.

They couldn't possibly be in a worse spot to start an excited argument, one that they couldn't afford to let be overheard. It was amazing that someone hadn't already awakened and come out to see what was taking place on the stair landing.

But Captain Pease again showed he was a man to cope with emergencies. As though he had made up his mind he resolutely circled one of his short arms around the foot locker, picked it up and cautiously took the first step toward descending the stairs. Yes, whatever he had in mind it was going to take place down stairs, not up. And he was not going to entrust Roy with carrying even half of the footlocker. If he was going to be perilled with close bannister railings and creaking steps he wanted to carry the brunt of the problem by himself.

Once, at the fifth step down, some portion of the woodwork groaned as though a carpenter were pulling out a heavy

nail with a crowbar. Hollis immediately froze, all except his head which he pivoted around to glare at Roy. He stuck out his lips as though forming the sound, "sh". Of course, he did not let the slightest ~~whisper~~ come out. The man was hardly breathing, much less speaking.

Roy was sure the board had creaked because Hollis, not he, had stepped on the wrong area of the stair. But he said nothing. When trying to sneak out of an old, pine framed boarding house you cannot stop to accuse your fellow escaper of making all the noise.

At last they had stepped off the bottom riser. The brother-in-law, still balancing the footlocker uncomfortably under one arm, paused to look the situation over. Eight or ten feet ahead across a carpetted entrance hall was the front door. Its upper panel was glass, and through it they could see Rena sitting in the new Buick out at the curb. She was resting her left elbow on the frame of her open window and ~~picking~~ at her permanent with her manicured fingers. If she was listening to the radio she had it tuned thoughtfully low. The only sound they could hear was a faint snoring coming from one of the back rooms on the lower floor.

Over to the right they could ~~make out the~~ varnished frame work of the dining room door. Now, of course, it was locked. To the left was the sitting room door. For some reason the methodical Mrs. Sollers also kept it locked after eleven pm. The entrance hall ran passed the staircase and blended into a narrow hall which led back to rented rooms, the kitchen and Mr. and Mrs. Soller's cramped living quarters. The hallway jogged around them to end in a backdoor (no doubt locked), some rickety back steps,

then the backyard. Hollis must have already learned most of this architectural layout from his visits earlier in the evening.

Now, however, he seemed stumped. Which way should he turn? If they went out the front door, the only passage they knew not to be locked, they would be on the tiny front porch. There wasn't even a bush between the porch and the Buick. But they must get some where and talk. Above all they had to get rid of the luggage. If caught with it and challenged how would they explain its weird, mixed-up contents?

As for Roy he saw no reason why they couldn't boldly go out to the Buick and tell Rena. Why shouldn't she know that the two of them had something to talk about that was not for her ears? They could drive her to the Palace, show her up to her room, then they would have the whole city to themselves. Hollis, however, seemed to think this would be disaster. With the caution of handling bowls of nitroglycerin he eased the footlocker to the floor. Stealthily he rubbed his arm. It must have been aching badly with fatigue. Then he again clutched the locker, now hoisting it all the way to his shoulder, and took a careful step toward the back hall. He had made up his mind. Rather than let Rena in on this thing he was going to try to tip-toe the full length of the old frame house and exit through a back door, probably closed.

To Roy this was insanity. Reaching out to touch Hollis's shoulder he whispered, "No". Pease shook his hand loose, eased the footlocker to the floor and, again, put his right hand over Roy's mouth. With his left he raised his index finger to his own lips and made like he was saying, "Sh". Both his hands were trembling.

There was nothing to do but follow the man on a desperate trip through the entire length of the house. What a chance they

were taking. If caught not only would they have to explain the contents of the footlocker but what they were doing in a forbidden part of the house.

But Hollis had the reflexes of a jungle animal. He might have been the one who set off the noise on the stairway, but after that one mistake he did no bungling whatever. With the silence of a moth he slid both himself and the footlocker between the narrow walls of the back hall.

Roy hardly dared breath as he followed at the safest possible distance. The snoring they had heard in the entrance way grew louder. From Mr. Sollers, no doubt. Fortunately, it was by this noise that they managed to judge the location of the landlord's sleeping quarters and thus estimate correctly where the jog in the pitch black passage way occurred.

Once around the jog they were relived to find that the back door was left ajar on this hot night. But also the door to the nearby bedroom was left open a crack. Once the snores from that room broke off with a snort. Hollis and Roy froze. After a moment Mr. Sollers set his bellows-like lungs going again. It seemed he had merely turned over in bed.

The Soller's kept neither a cat nor a dog, but a stray spotted alley cat darted across the narrow back yard as the two men tip-toed passed the locked tool shed and opened the gate to the alley.. Another cat jumped out of the garbage can that was stacked there.

But here, around on the far side of the tool shed, they, at last, had some sort of privacy.

All the way out here Roy had been thinking over what he

would say once they reached a time and place where they could talk. He knew Hollis had been thinking over the same thing. So now, instead of sudden accusations and denials which might have taken place had they been able to talk on the stairs, both approached the matter indirectly.

Hollis said, "This fellow Tolliver. The tall fellow. He was quite a bit older than you. Yes. I noticed that. Not your age group at all. He would know how to lead you into things--"

Roy recognized the technique. Pease was skipping the part about asking Roy to explain. Instead he was automatically jumping to the worst conclusion, that Roy was a transvestite. And he was giving his wife's brother a chance to admit it by blaming someone else.

Grover had his own point that he wanted to air out immediately. So he didn't answer this tricky question. Perhaps he had read too many detective stories, because now he felt all he had to do was point out some discrepancies and the whole matter would be cleared up.

"Those clothes. Those brassieres and things. They're all different sizes. Some big. Most of them real small. Tolliver couldn't have worn them. Something's wrong--"

"Never mind that," Hollis cut him short. He had started out smooth and calm, but you could tell that manner would not last very long. "You knew this older man. You knew him well enough to keep a foot locker full of his clothes--"

"They're not his--"

"Hush. I'm trying to point out what the authorities would say. What the college officials would ask you, what the dean of men would ask you, even what the police might ask you--"

Again, Roy realized what sort of tack his brother-in-law was on. He was trying to hint that the matter could get out of hand, to frighten him with the threat of the dean of men, even the police. It did, indeed, make Grover feel uneasy. He knew what Pease did not. This wasn't a threat. In some ways the matter was worse than the Captain thought, but that was no reason to admit a lot of things that were not true.

"I don't know anything about these clothes," he said.

"Come now," said Hollis. "You were trying to tell me they were phonograph records--".

"I thought they were."

"Roy," Hollis drew himself up impatiently. "It's now the wee hours in the morning. My wife, your sister, is patiently waiting for us. She's trusting you. She's trusting me. She remembers you as the little boy playing in the fields and pastures of Grass Prairie. She doesn't realize you've grown up, that you've been away from her for years, that you haven't had the benefit of a guiding father--"

Again he was trying to let Roy sluff the blame off on some one else. What to do? How true that it was late at night. How true that he was keeping Rena awake--even though she seemed to have developed into a night owl during the long years they had been away from each other. It was true a dog might start barking. A policeman might drive his patrol car down this alley. It was also true that Roy was going to have to have some help. So, he began telling his brother-in-law everything. Almost everything.

"I'm queer," he said.

Hollis took a quick breath. Maybe he had not been jump-

ing to conclusions. Maybe he had only been tossing out scares without actually believing he was hitting near the truth. If he was a psychiatrist his professional calm was badly shaken. Nervously he fidgeted from one foot to the other. As he did so he glanced at the footlocker and edged away from it. One of his hands arose and touched his ear then lowered and rested on the garbage can. When he realized what he was touching he recoiled as though he had strayed on to something hot, slithery or vile.

But Roy noticed he soon got ahold of himself. You could see he was a man who took pride in handling surprises, even loathesome ones. You could tell he had studied shrewdness, ways to dominate, how to drop a little praise here, stir up a little guilt there and frighten with hints in between. Within a few moments he was back picking and probing at Roy's confession, suggesting, over-stating, under-stating, drawing him out.

Roy's first sex experience back in Gloriona came out.

"But if you knew what to do with this man--what did you say his name was? Malotte? You must have had experiences before. You had to be showed. Someone had to influence you--"

"Not me," said Roy. "I didn't have to have anyone show me what to do."

Hollis would not take that for an answer. "You've repressed something, blotted it completely out of your conscious mind. Something earlier. Perhaps some man you saw only once, in a rest room. Did anything happen to you in a rest room when you were a child?"

To Roy childhood meant skimpy meals in Grass Prairie, quarrelling parents, gangs of neighborhood bullies who singled him



out to beat up. Why re-open that closed door? So he avoided childhood and told about "John", the man he was supposed to find at the cemetery, about getting suckered into holding a package of dope at Mrs. Laudermilch's, about having to go to dean's office tomorrow. He didn't, as yet, tell about Larry Thorpe.

"Uh-huh," Pease kept nodding. "Uh-huh, I thought something of this nature would come out." But his voice did not sound sympathetic. He was back to squirming from one foot to another, and he kept looking around at the vague, unpleasant forms that surrounded them in the dark alley. "Dope. I expected something like dope. Narcotics, transvestitism, homosexuality. They tend to go together. You should realize that Roy. All three of them fit in a single lump. All are connected with the thrill of kicking over the traces, of flying in the face of authority. Now then, Roy, out of respect for your family, out of love for my wife, I will help you out. That is, I'll help you out with what little I can do--"

"I need someone to go to the dean's with me tomorrow. So he'll know I'm not in this alone--"

"Roy, this is the thing I want to talk to you about. You sound like you're going to be fighting the dean. You must realize you have to cooperate with him. You must help him find a solution to this problem. It's late at night. I can't talk to you as much as I should. But if I'm going to help you out you are going to have to cooperate with me. I won't stick with you if you're fighting me."

Roy did not understand. Cooperate with his brother-in-law? What did he mean?

"What we'll do is put it up to him that you are willing to undergo psycho-therapy. You will admit that you've strayed from the paths a young person usually follows. You'll admit you are sick. We'll point out that you come from a broken home, that you haven't had the benefit of a father. But you are willing to cooperate. You're willing to undergo psycho-therapeutic treatment, to get yourself ready to face life in a sensible way. Frankly, I myself, don't think you're quite ready to enlist in military service just yet. The dean may want to force you in that direction. Now, if you point out that you are willing to undergo treatment, that you are getting yourself straightened out so you can make a better citizen, a better soldier in the future he may agree to let you hang on at the University. Maybe you'll get to finish out the semester."

Roy did not like the sound of this. But Pease was pressing forward with his plan. The footlocker might have been repulsive to him before, but now he re-opened it with complete calm.

"We're going to search it," he said. "Your friend planted it in your room for some reason. Let's find out the whole story."

It would do no good to say Tolliver was not really his friend. Pease showed signs of being impatient with any contradictions to his statements. It was late at night. It was a miracle they hadn't already been discovered in the alley. If he was going to oppose Pease in any way it would be best to think it over.

Pease took out each of the oddly assorted garments and held them up to the moonlight. With each one he asked Roy if he had seen it before.

"No," said Roy.

"Think, Roy. Maybe you've seen your friend wearing it."

"No."

"You're sure you haven't worn it yourself?"

"I haven't worn anything like this stuff. I know nothing about any of it."

When he reached the last one Hollis seemed disappointed.

"You didn't take anything out of this footlocker before we opened, did you?"

Roy protested that he had no opportunity to do so, that Pease, himself, knew more about that piece of luggage than he did. He and Rena were at the boarding house when Tolliver brought it in. Pease did not like to be reminded of that point.

"Roy, we have to work with each other. We can't be fighting each other. I expected to find some narcotics, a little package of marijuana, or little box of something stronger than that. When was the last time you smoked a reefer, Roy?"

Would he have to deny such statements all night long? He was tired. It would be a blessing if a neighborhood dog were to start barking so that would have to leave this place. Even if a cop should come down the alley and catch them that would be better than constantly denying Pease's accusations. Why didn't Rena come back to look for them? By this time she should be worried that they hadn't showed up.

Finally the Captain gave up. "Well, let's call it a night. Now then, Roy, do you see that garbage can about three houses down? The lid is off. It will be easy to wad up these clothes and stuff them in it. If you're careful you can bury the wad underneath some cans or something. Go on. Get rid of the clothes, and we'll

call it a night."

Pease gave these instructions with just the right mixture of firmness and guile. He made it sound like child's play, a task anyone could carry out if he had a smidgen of savoir-faire.

Roy, reluctant, stood fumbling with the footlocker handle. The Captain, to cover up his hesitation, casually looked up at the moonlit sky and whistled softly between his teeth. He gave the impression that such a beautiful night should not be wasted in an alley and that Roy should get moving.

Well, Roy thought, his brother-in-law had already taken far greater risks all to help him out. Yes, he would get moving. He fumbled clumsily as he bundled the clothes up in a wad and cinched them tight with a spare belt. Even belted tightly they formed an enormous lump, one that would more than half fill a garbage can. The problems that would soon face him bothered him, but Pease kept looking at the sky and making the little noise with his teeth. Hollis was not going to offer further help. Roy, alone, would have to get rid of the clothes, and if the neighbor's garbage can turned out to be full that would be entirely his headache.

The garbage can was full, or nearly so. The material on top was slimy things, beef gristle and what looked like spoiled canned tomatoes. When Roy eased a finger down further he hit a layer of tin cans. If he bothered them they would clank like a charging fire engine. Damn Hollis. This was a foolish way to get rid of clothes. If he hid the bundle in the bushes or crammed them in on top of the can someone would notice them, undo the bundle, gasp at the contents and start a neighborhood inquiry.

The Soller's would get wind of it, might link it up with the questionable Mr. Tolliver, and all their night's risks will have been in vain.

All the curses of a mad house be on Hollis. This plan was not going to work. They would have to think of something else. Roy looked back toward the Soller's tool shed. He must signal his brother-in-law to come and help him out. But Pease was no longer there. He had even left the empty footlocker, now closed and placed in the shadows of the tool shed, for Roy to fool with.

A double set of curses on his brother-in-law. So, he had run off and left this minor little detail all to Roy. A subtle little bit of punishment, and a reminder that he must wiggle himself out of his own messes.

His own messes. Yes, he had been gullible. Very gullible. But it had not been his idea to burglarize the boarding house and get rid of evidence in a neighbor's garbage can. The fact was the fast thinking Captain Pease had deserted him mid-way in a hair-brained scheme.

But it would do no good to fret. He was now stuck with a bundle of panties and brassieres, and every second he held on to them increased the chances of discovery. Where was another garbage can?

He peered through the shadows. How well moonlight camouflaged everything whether above the eye-line or below it. Perhaps that was something like a refuse can a block down. A block down, across a lighted street. Such a distant thing. And would it, if really a garbage can, be empty or full?

Carefully, he eased one foot in front of the other. By the

time he reached the lighted street his heart was pounding. Finally he was half way down the alley of the adjoining block. What a relief. That blob he had thought might be a garbage can really was a garbage can. Mercifully, the lid slid off with only a slight scraping noise. Inside was darkness. He felt downward, and close to the bottom he struck something that felt like dried leaves. Ah, this neighbor had not been emptying spoiled fruit but only cleaning out a small flower bed. After all he had been through it was easy to slip in his bundle and cover it with a layer of the leaves. Hollis himself couldn't have done a better job of replacing the lid.

Half of his ordeal was over. There remained only the problem of getting the empty footlocker back inside his room in the Soller's boarding house. Fortunately, there was no reason for him to hide from Rena. Of course, neither she, no Hollis nor the Buick were at the curb any longer. So, he was able to go around the house, enter the front door and ease himself up the stairs. Finally, the empty footlocker was in its place beside his bedroom wall, and he was in bed.

When his head hit the pillow he was sure he would soon be fast asleep. But such was not the case. In spite of the night's exhausting experiences he found himself pondering problems and solutions.

He did not like his brother-in-law. Just why he did not was hard to state. Certainly the man had an abundance of admirable traits in his favor. He was outstandingly successful. How many boys from the back waters of Oklahoma could boast a doctor's degree while still in their twenties? He was in the service, had gone in with the rank of Captain, and it looked like he would

soon rise higher. Already the youth had learned a set of extremely practical techniques for coping with the world. His cool head in handling the footlocker problem had probably saved Roy a lot of trouble. But the fact remained, Grover didn't like him.

While he tossed on his pillow he boiled with resentment. Cooperate with the dean, indeed. Please meant today to him. Admit he was sick, indeed. He had no temperature. He had not broken out with bumps. He was not sick. Get himself ready to join the service, indeed. He would stay out of that fluid, floating prison if there was any way of doing so.

Besides he had heard rumors about queers and the service, vague stories that they wouldn't take you if you were one. Right here in the boarding house was a fellow who had flunked his induction examination. He told everyone it was because he walked in his sleep. But one day he was telling the boys about the day he went up. "--A lot of questions to fill out. I didn't know what some of it was." Then this vapory fellow made an embarrassing faux pas. "--Homo, homo something. Whatever it is they said it would keep you out if you had it."

That must mean if you admitted "you had it" you would stay out. If you didn't you went in. And the dean and Hollis and everybody else was trying to force him in anyway.

Why, if he wanted to he could thumb his nose at the whole bunch. They might throw him out of the University, but they couldn't force him into any thing else. Smart men like the dean and Hollis were pulling fast ones. They were scaring boys into uniform like frightened sheep. Still the thought of admitting this thing was frightening too. No, he didn't want to do that.

And Roy drifted off into an uneasy sleep swearing he would show both Hollis and the dean that he was not a frightened sheep.

He awakened with the first clatter of pots and pans down in the kitchen. His roommate was still fighting the thought of getting up and lay still as a log with his sheet pulled over his head. Some early riser was using the bathroom. Someone else, perhaps Mr. Sollers in quest of the morning paper, was opening the front door down stairs. The clumsy old man had much more trouble getting it to swing smoothly than either Roy or Hollis had had last night.

The footlocker was still lying against the wall. No one would be able to tell it was empty unless he kicked it. Putting in some old clothes for weight would be a final detail he would have to perform as soon as he had the chance.

That would be a minor problem. For now that he had slept his mind had let him awaken with a solution he was eager to put in effect at once. He would quit the university. Quit it before he had to report to the dean, quit it before he was forced into some idiotic psychiatric treatment with his brother-in-law. He would say good bye to the troubles at the University and get a job acting on the stage.

Yes, he knew that getting on the stage was a pipe dream that thousands failed at. But a few succeeded. Beulah Astor, for example. It looked like she, too, had gotten into trouble. Had she crawled to the dean to cooperate in some mind cleansing scheme? No, she had not. It looked like she had said good-bye and walked right into a plush job with a professional touring group.

How did she do it? Roy did not know. But he could guess.



She had spent years developing "pull". It looked like she was as clever at staying on top of adverse events as Hollis was, maybe more so. Roy did not have the years of cultivated contacts to rely upon, but he had something else in his favor. A lot of male actors were being drafted. Beulah, herself, had flung this fact at him back when she was telling him off.

The thing to do was investigate his chances. Why not hit up old Beulah herself? No matter that they had once quarrelled. Also there was Mcnay. If the professor was going to get friendly Roy might as well take advantage of it and ask him if he could introduce him to some contacts in the theatrical world.

In a few days he would have a check from his dad. At the most it would be twenty-five dollars. Not much with which to assault the cruel world, but Roy had youth and good looks. His desperation would force him to test out remote risks. It was time to get out of bed and test them.

As his feet hit the floor no one was as yet using the upstairs hall telephone. His roommate, still wrapped cocoon fashion in his bed sheet, was asleep. Someone was up and taking a shower. He had left the bathroom door open so steam was fogging the hallway.

Roy's bedside clock pointed to seven. Normally there would be much more activity in the twenty room boarding house by that hour. No doubt they were all planning to follow the call for a mass "strike" which Jessup had announced last night. Most of them, like his roommate would be sleeping in, and Grover should be able to put through several phone calls.

But the place was not completely quiescent. Out in the hall Roy bumped into a boy who was already dressed and headed

for the stairs. He wore a bow tie. His hair was brushed, and he carried an arm full of books. It looked like he was going to class.

"No strike," he said. "All called off. Better get moving."

Another boy, dressed only in his shorts, was rushing out of room number twelve. After leaping out of bed he had taken time only to light a cigarette and grab a loose leaf note book.

"Grover, old boy," he said, the cigarette wagging between his lips, "Could you let me at that telephone first? Didn't think we were having classes today. Didn't do my math. Got to call for help." He all but grabbed the receiver out of Roy's hand and was dialing by the time Grover could say, "Sure, Go ahead."

One of the well-to-do boys in number fifteen had a radio. He had just turned it on, and although he kept it thoughtfully low Roy caught the name "Tom Jessup" and the word "investigation." A moment later he thought he heard the name "Mitchell Farley" mentioned. Some sort of development about the strike must have made the news. But to Roy school was already a thing of the past, and he had more important things to mind than a foolish strike.

The fellow who had snatched the phone out of his hand to get urgent help on his math had expected to get it from his girl friend, because he was now saying, "Hello, Peaches," and something about how sleepy she sounded. It made Roy feel uneasy.

If Beulah Astor was really leaving town she might be flying the coop this morning. He should not have relinquished the phone so politely. Minutes might be important. Of course there

was an extension in the first floor hall, but it was only an extension and the fellow with the math problem would have it tied up. He had heard that Mrs. Sollers had a separate line installed in her own room. Would she let him use it? If he hurried and got dressed and got down stairs before the breakfast rush she might let him do so. Otherwise he would have to find a pay phone in a drugstore. It would be foolish to let very much time slip by.

But when he got down stairs he did not find Mrs. Sollers rushing to get the eggs on the table. He found Marvin Bates, a dish towel tied around his waist, bringing a coffee maker from the kitchen. Marvin noticed Roy as soon as he appeared in the dining room door and dropped his gaze. He had trouble setting the big percolator down without getting the cord tangled around the one, lone boarder seated at the table for twenty.

Marvin was a loose jointed rural type, majoring in math, who sometimes waited tables when the landlady was rushed. With only one eater at the table Roy wondered why he was helping out. "Where's Mrs. Sollers?" he asked.

Bates mumbled something like, "She went out," and ducked back in the kitchen. Chester Flacker was the boy at the table. He really wasn't eating, but only picking at an egg with his fork while he read something interesting in an inside section of the morning paper. The front page was propped up in front of his face so Roy could easily read the headlines. The top one read "Homosexuals Arrested at University," and below those big black letters was the sub-heading, "Farley Mitchell Exposes Nest".

Roy wanted to read more, but Chester suddenly shook the paper, refolded it so his inside column was now out, and, giving

Grover a sharp look, stuck the news sheet on front of his face again. Now Roy could see what Chester must have been reading, probably the story beneath the two-column picture showing Marion Tolliver being arrested. Tolliver's disheveled hair matched his wrinkled shirt which was unbuttoned all the way down to his belt. His right hand was handcuffed to a policeman. Another cop on his left held him by the shoulder.

"You gonna eat?" Marvin Bates asked.

Roy forced his eyes away from the paper and looked up. "Eat?" he mumbled.

He did not know what he wanted to do, and Marvin was not helping him out. As soon as he asked his question the new waiter ducked back into the kitchen.

Roy followed him. "Where's the landlady? Where's Mr. Sollers?" he asked.

"A policeman came real early this morning. She got me to serve tables. I think they all went out some place." His pronoun reference was not easy to follow, and neither was the logic behind his movements. He kept pausing in his serving duties to glance out the back kitchen window. This was a half-sized affair placed high on the wall. It admitted light, but afforded a view of nothing more than the roof of the tool shed in the back yard.

Roy, with his mouth open, pranced back and forth without moving any place. What should he do? The word "policeman" stunned him. He had not expected anything so official so soon. The big crisis was supposed to come this afternoon when he met his appointment with the dean. By then, he had hoped, he would have the promise of an interesting acting job, and he could tell everybody to go jump in the lake. But a policeman was here

now. Possibly he and the Sollers's were out back looking over the various garbage cans in the alley. He did not know what developments had taken place except that he was on the edge of something hot. Marion Tolliver, obviously, had not kept his appointment with the Navy. He had an appointment with the law instead, and God knows what kind of stories he was telling.

When one is faced with a bad problem the usual reaction is to fall back on your relatives for help. And the first clear thought that came through his mind was he wanted to call his mother. She would certainly forgive a long distance call, collect, if she knew how bad the situation was. (Of course, he would not have to tell her everything.) The Gloriona elementary school began at nine o'clock, so she was still in her apartment, probably rushing to get breakfast ready. He must call her.

"I want to use the phone. Mrs. Sollers's phone," he said.

"Huh? Phone? Whose phone?" asked Marvin, and as he spoke he glided over toward the high back window and reached up for something. Roy could not see just what.

"No, I don't," said Roy. "I want to use the phone at the drugstore. I'm going out. I'll--I'll get breakfast later."

"Out?" asked Marvin. "Well, wait a minute. Not so fast."

Roy did not wait. Before the make-shift waiter was through speaking he was half way to the front door. When he actually got to the front door and opened it he was surprised to see Pease's new Buick parked at the curb. Hollis had just rolled up and was now getting hurriedly out of the driver's seat. As soon as he saw Roy at the door he assumed a calm, dignified manner and began circling the front end of the Buick to walk toward him.

He had not been alone in the car. Rena, with her permanent beautifully combed, was sitting on the right hand front seat. She did not glance up to discover Roy at the front door as her husband had done. She was busy reading the morning paper. It looked like Roy's secret could not be kept from her much longer.

However, Hollis still seemed bent on trying to keep her sheilded from the awful news, because he approached Roy with an almost casual saunter. He stopped quit close to his brother-in-law, and with his hands in his pockets asked in a low voice, "Is everything all right?"

"No," said Roy. "I mean I don't know. Maybe. I'm going to the drugstore to phone Mama."

"Your Mama?" Hollis echoed these words in a low voice but in tones that seemed quite shocked. "You don't mean your 'Mama'. For God's sake. You're a grown man. No regressions to infantilism. Please. You mean your 'Mother', and there's no need to drag Mrs. Grover into this mess. I know what she'll do. She'll just wring her hands and have hysterics. Don't call her. Has anyone showed up? Have you popped off and admitted anything? If you have I'm not sure I can help you. You must have read the papers. You know this is going to blow up into a big mess."

"Hollis, I don't want to take any treatments. I don't want to stay in school. And I'm going to call--to call her." He had started his speech with the intention of breaking completely with Hollis. But there was something about the man's stern, military gaze that won out. As much as he wanted to he could not even utter the word, "mama."

"Her?" said Hollis. "Who do you mean?"

"Alright. I mean I want to call my mother."

"But you are not going to, are you?" said Captain Pease. His pale blue eyes bored into Roy's brown ones like nails. No doubt about it, when Hollis joined the military service he had stepped into a fitting career.

"Yes. I mean I want to. I need to talk to some one in my family."

"You have me. I'm your brother-in-law, and I'm trained to help with problems such as this. Now then, if the police aren't here already they will be damned quick. The first thing that Tolliver person will want to do is pass the buck off on to someone else. If he can't do that he'll try to drag as many others into the muddle as he can. Needless to say, you're going back to classes today. That fool strike has fizzled out completely. All the board of regents needed to do was expose some scandal and the day would be theirs. Any one with a lick of sense could see what their move would be. Now then, no matter what you've said in the past, you are now going to apologize, promise to straighten yourself out, place yourself in the hands of a good psychiatrist and cooperate with the dean. That's what I told you last night. That's what we're going to do today."

When you are not quite eighteen and someone tells you you are going to cooperate the chances of your saying, "Yes sir," are very slim. Even after you have been inducted into the armed services it will take a few hours training before you can come up with a salute and those two words. Roy quickly came out with a Bronx cheer that splattered saliva in his brother-in-law's face. The brother-in-law was reaching out to grab his shoulder when the two of them heard the same voice.

"Mr. Grover. Mr. Grover."

It sounded like a child's voice, but it might have been a ventriloquist's because neither of them could tell where it came from. A student, with books in hand, was coming out of the boarding house. However, he was lighting a cigarette and angling across the lawn in a hurry to get to the street. He certainly had not called Roy, "Mr. Grover." No one was leaning out of a window, and there seemed to be no cars parked on the street except the new Buick.

They did hear another noise, a tapping sound. Rena, for some reason, had rolled up her window on this fine spring morning. Probably she was making it quite clear that she had no idea what they were talking about. But now she was seeing fit to help them out, just a tiny bit, on whatever they might be discussing. She had located the child's voice and was tapping on her car window to get their attention. As soon as she caught their eye she pointed to a little boy standing by a privet hedge at the end of the block.

The little boy, about five years old, red-headed and freckled faced, was neatly dressed in yellow trousers and blue shirt. Ashfully, he curled his fingers together and called, "Mr. Grover," again. The appearance of a neat little boy was one of the few things unusual enough to stop the fight that was about to take place. On second glance Roy was able to catch the sight of something through the thick leaves of the hedge, something yellow. It was the battered sides of Mr. McKay's white ghost. The kid must be the professor's little boy, and the professor, for some reason had parked, half hidden, on a side street. It was the street Roy had crossed last night



to get to the alley in the next block.

Rena was tapping again. When they looked in her direction they saw her smiling broadly and again pointing to some other attraction down by the hedge. Her smile seemed to say that she was in robust good humor and a fight was the last thing in the world that could be coming off. Still, of course, she seemed to have no idea what they might be quarrelling over..

About ten feet from the hedge was a postal letter drop box. Now they were able to see that Mr. Mackay was standing beside it. Perhaps he had been there all the time, and perhaps he was half hidden by it because he was dropping in a letter. Anyway, he was smiling. Even from three houses away you could see that his broad, theatrical smile was even more jovial than Rena's. From the expressions on these two spectator's faces you would never guess that there was a shred of acrimony in the whole state of Texas.

Mackay waved airily toward the two men. The little boy, his mission now completed, ran back to his papa. McKay picked him up with one hand, held him fondly to his chest, and with his other hand motioned for Roy to come down and join him. Then he disappeared, with the little kid, behind the hedge, probably to wait comfortably for the men in the seat of his convertible.

Hollis shunned the professor's invitation by blowing out a puff of air contemptuously. But Rena again tapped on her car window glass and motioned back toward the hedge. To her, as well as Roy, the invitation sounded like a good idea. If they kept on where they were the only course they had open was a fight.

It was Rena's tapping that caused Hollis to give in. The man seemed incapable of going against his pretty wife's wishes even when it meant breaking off administering some badly needed discipline.

Once they were at the end of the block they saw the hedge concealed many things besides the professor's yellow "white ghost". When they turned the corner and looked down the side street they saw a shiny gray Packard parked so it blocked the entrance to the alley, the one leading behind the boarding house.

The man sitting calmly in the driver's seat was dressed in an expensive looking suit almost the same shade of gray as his automobile. He took in Roy and Hollis with one glance. Then, as though the two new arrivals didn't interest him, he began fumbling with something on his dashboard. In a moment he opened his car door and daintily held up a dashboard ash tray. He was going to empty it some where. The thing probably needed emptying badly because the man, eyes squinted, sucked on a cigarette as he walked around the front of his car and lifted up the lid of a garbage can.

Roy realized this was a garbage can he had missed last night. It was sitting at the mouth of the alley and probably belonged to the big brown boarding house crowded on to the corner lot a slim two feet away from the hedge. As the well dressed man dumped out his packed ash tray Roy saw the can was only half full. If he had found it last night he would have crammed the empty half full of Tolliver's assortment of clothes and they would be discovered right now. Both he and Hollis gasped at this close call.

A pretty woman was sitting in the passenger half of the

Backard's front seat. About ten years younger than the driver she was much better preserved than he was. In spite of some tautness about the lips she could still pass for a young woman. It was hard to see her eyes. They were behind rimless glasses which were polished so they reflected the mottled light filtering through the shade of the hedge. Roy thought she was looking straight down the side street. But if she was she showed no signs of noticing the two new arrivals. Apparently new developments never bothered her. You guessed she had already seen everything. Something about her fitted in very well with the man who was emptying the ash tray. They could only be man and wife.

After a moment her husband had finished emptying the tray. As he sauntered back to the driver's seat he flipped the butt he was smoking into the hedge. As he settled back into his car the woman lit another cigarette and handed it to him. Then she picked up a pair of knitting needles and began working on a small, fluffy pink garment. It was obvious that the two had the alley entrance blocked off, and they were prepared to keep it blocked off forever if need be.

Roy could see the tail end of another, a well-waxed, navy blue car, parked in the alley itself. Its driver would not be able to back out onto the side street without hitting the new Backard. By stepping around to the street side of McAsy's "white ghost" Roy could see passed the corner of the hedge and glimpse the driver of this third car. It was Dean Rugger. Beside him sat a gray headed woman conservatively dressed in a light blue blouse. Her gray curls were freshly, but conservatively, arranged around her powdered forehead. She also fitted in with the man

seated beside her, another husband and wife team. It seemed that everyone concerned in the drama taking place were conspicuously displaying their family relationships.

Oswald McKay and Hollis did not get along well. Each one got stuck in the rut of sizing the other one up, and their conversation, as they squinted at each other, threatened to go on in endless sentences of small talk. "Yes. Yes. We met last night. Yes, I remember. A nice morning. Hot, but not a scorcher." All the time McKay kept holding the small red-headed boy close to his chest. The little tot's head was smack against the professor's cheek. Roy was startled at the lack of resemblance between father and son.

"He's adopted," Roy whispered to himself as Pease and the professor kept on with meaningless phrases, or rather with phrases that were quaking with overtones seeping across from unexpressed thoughts: "Your wife was with you last night, I believe". Hollis's quick reply to this was, "She's here this morning too. Right back there. The lady in the Buick. You are married?" A foolish and unthinking question.

"Yes, yes," replied McKay. "The wife is getting the little one's off to school. Two older boys. Eight and ten. Third and fifth grades. Gregory, here, won't be starting until next year. You have children?"

The fact that Hollis did not, as yet, have an off-spring put him to a slight disadvantage, and he avoided a direct answer. "You, uh, You called us over, I believe. You, uh, wanted to talk to us?"

"Yes. To Roy. Well, to both of you. I minor little favor. I have been asked to pick up a foot locker for an unfortunate

young man--well, not so young--well, one of our students, a post graduate student. The poor fellow has no one else to turn to, no near relatives in this part of the world. Otherwise I would not be taking time away from, from well, from my teaching duties. An eight o'clock class. I would hate to miss it. Gregory, Honey, Daddy's going to have to set you down for a teeny bit. Daddy's shirt is getting all wrinkled."

As McKay placed the little boy between his legs and began dabbing at his shirt with a handkerchief he asked, "You two have noticed the police are here, haven't you? You probably have had more contact with them than I have had. They're holed up in the alley. Got the other end blocked, and the unfortunate young man's lawyer has got this outlet sewed up. Gregory, Honey, if you'll be sweet Dady will hold you up again."

"Police?" asked Hollis. His tone was off-hand, except for one high pitched quaver toward the end of the word. "Oh, the police. I'm not surprised. The police. Roy, you didn't tell me about this."

"It's not serious," McKay broke in. "I mean it's not serious for Roy. Just the matter of who is entitled to pick up this unfortunate young man's foot-locker. The young man's lawyer, he's Mr. Donald Sprague, the gentleman sitting in the gray Packard, insists that the police are not entitled to take it. It's my opinion that the footlocker was left in Roy's possession--or at least that's what the unfortunate young man told me when I spoke with him this morning. Uh, I saw him, uh, I was allowed to see him, in jail. It's my opinion that only Roy has the right to say who shall be entitled to take the footlocker out of his room. I've come to ask Roy if he would turn it over to me and to no

one else. Of course I'm asking both of you. I certainly don't want Roy's relatives to think I'm pulling him off in a corner by himself and--"

Hollis was frowning. With an undignified lurch he dropped his off-hand manner, snorted, and ran back toward the alley's entrance. As he passed the gray Packard he glared at the chain smoking lawyer sitting inside then whirled to peer down the alley. He placed his hands on his hips and looked hard at what he saw. Apparently, he was tired of second-hand evidence, and he was going to see for himself if the police were really on hand. As he gazed at whatever was before him Roy saw that Dean Rugger turned his thick neck in a ninety degree swivel to scrutinize the new comer. The dean's wife tilted her gray curls slightly to one side, but otherwise she kept a painfully correct expression on her face. After one glance at Hollis she sighed, corrected the tilt of her head, then peered through the windshield at nothing.

Both Donald Sprague and his wife kept poker faces. At least the best Roy could tell the man in the Packard had a poker face. Most of it was clouded behind cigarette smoke.

McAay was quick to take advantage of Captain Pease's absence. "Roy," he whispered, "is everything all right?"

"Well, yes. I guess so."

"Fine. Now listen. You know they've got Marion Tolliver down in the pokey. Terrible business. Phone calls have been flying around all night long. At least I suppose phone calls can fly. Well, at five-thirty this morning they let me see him. At that hour he hadn't yet hired Sprague to be his lawyer. He hadn't even got in touch with Sprague. He hadn't got in

touch with the dean. I was his first contact after the police got through with him. Marion's first words to me were about the footlocker. He wants me to get it and keep it out of sight. I guess something's in it that'll get him more fouled up than he already is--"

"I'll say there is," said Roy. As he said it he realized he was not telling the exact truth. He should have used the past tense. Ah yes, a little lie had slipped out, and he had made it sound so natural. Perhaps, in a time like this, that was something to be proud of.

"There is? What is it?" McKay looked distressed, the way a man looks when he has saddled himself with an unwanted responsibility.

As for Roy, he now realized his little lie had not been smart at all. The shrewd thing for him to do was pretend he had no idea what was in it. But it was too late for that. So he compounded his lie.

"Phonograph records. Everyone of them were busted. The Schuman-Heink's and all. I had to throw them in the garbage can," he said.

McKay looked at him oddly. "You threw them in the garbage?"

"Well, yes." Roy was now afraid he would have to tell which can. His experiment in lying was taking a bad turn.

"Did you empty the whole thing? Did you clean it out smooth?" McKay lowered his voice. "What I'm afraid of Roy, is there was some dope in it. Marijuana or maybe something worse like opium. They're playing a funny game Roy. Nobody wants to air out this sex charge if there's any way of squirming out.

from it. That is nobody but some hot-headed politicians like Norton Sales and Mitchell Farley. Of course those two bloodhounds have got sex on the brain and are going to smear everyone they can. But the cops and Sprague and everyone on Dr. Schein's side are willing to show it up as dope, not sex. They aren't thinking of poor old Tolliver. A sex charge would probably draw a suspended sentence. Narcotics will put him in the penitentiary. Sprague surprises me. I thought he'd be reasonable. I even begged Tolliver to call him up and hire him as his attorney. It seems they finally got in touch with each other about six-thirty this morning, and I wish they'd never done it."

He had to pause to set Gregory carefully on the ground so he could brush a new set of wrinkles out of his shirt. The kid wanted to dash off and play, but the professor held on to him with the hand that was not brushing the shirt. An up stairs window in the brown boarding house flew open and after a moment closed. They heard a back door some where behind the hedge open. A woman's querulous voice, first in sotto tones, and later in a loud squeal, called, "I know what I heard. I heard someone open my garbage lid. Listen you people. Stay out of my garbage can. If you can't get out of my alley, then stay out of my cans. I don't care if you are the police." Then, as she closed the door, she muttered to herself something about, "Scandal".

Roy looked up and noticed the lawyer Sprague, the one who had just emptied his ash tray, was insolently blowing smoke rings through his Peckard's window. Hollis had moved forward to the Dean's blue car and was, apparently, introducing himself



to Dr. Rugger. He was extending his hand through the car window, and the Dean was looking at it not sure whether he wanted to shake it or not. The dean's wife, rendered frantic by the appearance of yet another new comer, threw up her chin and began patting her neck with a dainty blue handkerchief. If the day or the conditions got any hotter it looked like this delicate lady might require some first aid.

Hollis's presence must have been noted further down the alley, because, just as the Captain's smile induced the Dean to shake his hand, two policemen rushed into view. One parked himself firmly an inch from Hollis's elbow, the other ran around the end of the navy blue car, his billy club swinging and his eyes flashing, to see who else might be with the new comer. When he spotted Roy, he called to his partner. "Hey, Moose, there's another one down here. He looks like the one we're after."

The big one at Pease's elbow took one look at Roy and lost interest in the uniformed Captain bold enough to talk to the Dean, and he and his partner rushed toward the White Ghost. This triggered an ensemble of action. Sprague threw his cigarette in the weeds, and he and his wife sprang out of their car and also rushed toward Roy. And two other people came running into view from wherever they had been stationed in the alley. They were, of course, Mr. and Mrs. Sollers. When the boarding house lady saw Roy her mouth flew open, and she said, "That's him. He's down here by the hedge. He's trying to skip out. Now's your chance. Do it."

Mr. Sollers started to dart back into the alley, but this

touched off more action. Dean Rugger, literally pushing Hollis out of the way jumped out of his car--while his wife frantically fanned her face with her little handkerchief--and screamed, "No you don't. Officer. Mr. Sprague. He's trying to sneak back in the house. No you don't. Nobody can touch that suit case. That's tampering with evidence. Stay where you are. Officer. That man and his wife are trying to sneak back in the house."

Mrs. Sollers put her hands on her hips and said, "It's our house. We'll go into it when we want to." But her husband stopped dead in his tracks and looked sheepishly at the officers.

"We've been through all that before," said Mrs. Sprague who, with her hands as squarely on her hips as were Mrs. Sollers', changed directions and, instead of joining the rush to Roy, butted into the ruckus around the navy blue car. "We've told you the law. If you even so much as get out of our sight we will assume you have gotten to the suitcase and planted evidence in it. You know what that can mean in a narcotics case."

"This ain't no narcotics case. You ain't foolin' me," said Mr. Sollers, who did not move any where, "We're ahold of a couple of goddamn queers who are trying to sneak out on us. No telling what people like that carry around in suitcases."

"It's not for you to decided what this case will turn into," said Mrs. Sprague. "You keep your nose clean and you won't have to smell any cesspools."

The two policemen had reached Roy as had Mr. Sprague. Hollis was also closing in on this new center of activity. McAsay, holding his little boy tightly to his chest, was backing away from it.

The policeman called Moose reached Roy first. But it was only a split second before Grover was surrounded, two policemen at either elbow, and Sprague and Hollis a short distance to the side of each of the cops.

"Hello there, young feller," said Moose. "Where do you think you're going?" And when Roy answered, "No where," he said, "I'll say you're not."

"I'm Donald Sprague," said the man from the Packard while fumbling in his shirt pocket for another cigarette. "Glad to know you, Mr. Grover, isn't it? You don't have to talk to the policemen if you don't want to."

"Shut up," said Moose. "You aren't representing this kid. Your client's down in the pokey."

"I'm just telling him the law," said Sprague. He had found another cigarette, placed it in his mouth, and as he spoke it jiggled up and down.

The woman who had bounced out the back door of the brown boarding house came running out again. "Officer, Officer," she called. "That man right there put something in my garbage can. I saw him do it. A filthy mess from his ash trays. Can I make him clean it out?"

Both the officer and Sprague ignored her. "Now then," said Moose, "We're going upstairs with you, and you're going to open that suitcase or footlocker, or whatever it was that man Tolliver brought to your room last night. We're gonna go up right now, and when you get through opening it you're going to hand it over to me."

"Don't do it," said Sprague.

"You listen to this guy," said Moose, "and you'll be behind

bers, and his client will be out breathing fresh air. You got nothing to worry about from us. It ain't your suitcase. It's all locked up, and you've left it that way, haven't you?"

"Don't answer that," said Sprague, but he was too late. Roy spoke while the lawyer was advising.

"Yes," said Roy.

Both Sprague and the cop tensed. "'Yes' means you've opened it. Is that right?" said Moose.

"No," said Roy. I haven't opened it." He thought he was being pretty good at lying, but he glanced at Hollis while he said it. Hollis shifted on his feet.

McKay stepped forward. "Officer," he said. "I called Mr. Grover over here to my car. He wasn't going any place. He's completely innocent in this matter."

Mrs. Sprague, who was still keeping guard by the navy blue car, broke in with a sharp call. "Watch out," she shrieked. "They're going back down the alley."

Everyone turned and saw that the Sollers's had sneaked away out of sight, and the whole party, including Roy and McKay, raced back to the alley to see where they had gone. As they did so two more windows opened. These were on the upstairs of a big gray house on the far side of the alley.

When Roy got to the mouth of the alley he found that the Sollers couple had run no more than thirty feet back toward their boarding house, had stopped and were prancing in their tracks. The landlady blew a strand of hair out of her face and said, "Shucks".

Her husband picked up a pea-sized pebble and flipped it

toward the back bumper of the police car.

The police car, a black thing with a red light in the rear window, was parked some ten feet in front of the Rugger automobile. In the excitement Roy still had time to catch a rear view glimpse of a man's head and shoulders, someone, not in uniform, sitting in the prowler car's back seat only inches ahead of the red spotlight.

But that view was only a glimpse. What goaded the boy into action was the leering look on Mr. Sollers's face. The pudgy man's beady little eyes flashed pure contempt as he tossed a second pebble in his hand. With a little hissing noise he flipped the pebble straight at Roy. It caught the boy on the right knee.

"Officer," Roy said, "did you hear what this man called me a minute ago? He called me a 'queer'. That's slander, isn't it? Officer, I just barely know what that word means, and it certainly doesn't apply to me. I can have this man arrested for calling me that, can't I?"

Moose laughed, and Hollis whispered, "Don't be a fool. Shut up."

Roy would not shut up. "Hush yourself," he said very loudly. "Officer, my own brother-in-law is taking sides with Mr. Sollers. The Dean is against me too. All of this has got to stop. I don't know anything about this man Tolliver. He practically forced his footlocker on me with a cock and bull story about being drafted or going to the Navy or something. If somebody's supposed to be going into the service you don't turn down little favors for him. I got stuck with that footlocker. I don't know anything about it. I don't know anything

Tolliver. I'm sick and tired of everybody looking at me like this--"

"Well now, young feller," said the policeman called Moose. "That's a lot of words you're saying yourself. All I can tell from this argument is a lot of people are calling everybody names. You can stop all of that by going up to your room with me, and we'll open that suitcase, and that'll be all there is to it."

"Don't do that," said Sprague. "Mr. Grover, I have the ~~order~~ straight from Mr. Tolliver. We spoke together scarcely an hour ago. You're to turn the footlocker over to me. All you have to do to end all this is take me up to your room, and hand this piece of luggage over to me. Everybody will shut up, go home, and I'm sure no one will dare insult you again."

"Insult," laughed Mr. Sollers. "When I was young I didn't go bawling to some cop when somebody insulted me. I blacked his eyes right then and there."

"Officer," said Mrs. Sollers. "This little squirt's talking big about slander. Well, I'm going to ask you a question. He's staying in my house. I can refuse to let him stay there, can't I? I can refuse to let him enter the place again. Isn't that right, Dr. Rugger? I'm not supposed to let anything in my house that will corrupt the morals of all the other nice boys staying there--"

As the landlady turned toward the Ruggers, the Dean's wife closed her eyes and placed both hands over her forehead. Her petite handkerchief, still clasped between her right hand fingers, draped down over one eye. She breathed heavily as

though in great pain.

"Dr. Rugger," said Hollis, "my brother-in-law and I are not asking you to take sides, anybody's side, in this thing at all. We're sure you'll act wisely. We're sure you'll be fair. Completely impartial. Needless to say I'll see to it that my brother-in-law abides by your decisions. We're willing to hand the footlocker over to you. I, myself, will be willing to go up and get it and bring it down to you. Officer, you can't object to our handing the suitcase over to an official from the University, can you?"

"I certainly object," said Sprague. "Anybody who hands that luggage over to the Dean will find himself in front of the judge."

The man sitting in the back seat of the prowler car had turned around to look the crowd over. Roy noticed him and could not keep his eyes off of him. Something about his sallow features was so familiar. If he thought hard enough he should be able to place him. Roy was puckering his brow and fidgeting when he happened to glance at the two policemen. Both were looking at him closely. At that moment Grover remembered who the man in the back seat was. He was the night clerk at the desk of the Palace Hotel, the one who had been on duty when "John" Griswald lured him up to his room.

Right at that moment he heard another window rise. The creaking noise came from further down the alley, from the Soller's boarding house to be exact. Roy and everyone else looked to see what was coming off.

The landlady's boarding house had only two windows opening on to her backyard, the half-window in the kitchen, the

one Marvin Bates had been interested in, and another half-window in the second floor shower. The shower was next door to Roy's bedroom. A bit of steam had whooshed out as this upstairs window opened, and the crowd saw something big being pushed through it. Several people gasped as they realized what it was, the footlocker. A second later it fell from the second floor and bounced with surprising springiness on the ground below.

Several people gasped as they realized what was happening. An unknown hand inside the boarding house had untied the Gordian knot and had tossed the disputed object out to whoever got it first.

Mrs. Sollers gave a shrill laugh. "That does it," she said. "Let's see who gets it now."

She, her husband, and about half the crowd immediately turned in their tracks and began sprinting toward the object which was taking several bounces to come to a rest. Hollis placed a restraining hand on Roy's wrist. "Stay here," he whispered. "The fat's in the fire now. We've got to talk to the dean."

Off in the distance Sprague, the least nimble of the sprinters and the last in the rush toward the footlocker, was yelling, "Don't touch it. Don't touch it. It's mine." Sollers was saying, "Go to hell. It's for the first one who gets his hand on it."

Back at the Dean's car a significant group remained behind. McKey still clasped Gregory to his chest and stood about six feet away from Roy. Both the dean and his wife stayed in their car. Their stiff-backed pose clearly showed they were



too dignified to take part in such a scramble. Hollis, pulling Roy by the elbow immediately lowered his head to car window level and began talking to the college official. Rugger was opening and closing his mouth as though the whole thing was too distasteful for him to completely form words. His wife, her little lace dabber in hand, was wiping perspiration from her neck.

"Mrs. Rugger," Hollis was saying. "If you remember I introduced myself a few minutes ago, a few minutes before this unpleasantness broke loose--"

"I remember," said the dean impatiently.

"I--we both--want to talk to you."

"There's very little I can do," said the dean.

"But you can listen to us. My wife comes from a very good family. In fact here she is. She is Roy's brother. I, myself, am going to be assigned to the University in a joint Armed Services research program. I hold a Ph.D. degree in psychology--"

It was true that his wife was there. Roy turned and saw that Rena was standing slightly to one side of him. As he looked at her she stepped forward and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Please," she whispered, "do what Hollis says. For my sake."

Her eyes were glistening with tears, and her hand felt cold and sweaty even through Roy's shirt.

"It'll be alright," she said. "Just trust in Hollis." With that she smiled at Roy, then turned and smiled at the Dean. She even bowed her head so she could look through the car window and catch Mrs. Rugger's eye. Again she smiled. Mrs. Rugger's mouth

dropped as though her facial muscles no longer worked, and her hostile eyes glared back at Rena. This did not phase Roy's pretty sister. Her smile broadened so it was really dazzling. Not until its full effect had brought a kindlier light to the older woman's eyes did she risk turning to one side. When she finally did she smiled at McKay and even stepped over and patted the little boy's legs.

"What a cute little fellow," she said. "And he looks just like his papa."

"That's nice of you to say so," said McKay. "But I have to admit he's my step child. All three of my boys are step-children. You're Roy's sister, aren't you. I'm glad to know you, and I think your advice is exactly right. Your husband seems such a sensible man. Roy you should do what he says. For your sister's sake. For my sake too. I'm asking you to cooperate. It's the best way."

Everyone was surprised to hear Mrs. Rugger cutting in on this advice. Although she spoke from her seat on the far side of the car her voice carried with surprising strength. The observers in the various upstairs windows must have heard her quite well. "Advice," she said. "You should have some advice yourself, Mr. McKay. The very idea, bringing your wife's five year old child to a back alley scandal. You've got no business being here yourself much less dragging along innocent children." As she spoke she leaned toward her husband's shoulder and pecked out the words. But as soon as she had delivered her opinion she resumed her formal, eyes-front position and fanned her neck with her handkerchief. "Gnats," she said. "Gnats swarming from these filthy garbage cans."

Mr. McKay, still holding on to Gregory, squatted slightly so he could get an eye contact view of the dean's wife. Then he said, in a voice so pleasant it seemed to cleanse the troubled air, "Why, good-morning, Mrs. Rugger. So nice to have a chance to say hello to you. I know you and your husband must be very busy in these stirring times. All of us appreciate the fact that you are taking a personal hand in these difficult problems. How are your nice grand children? Are they still planning to go to Cuba this summer?"

"What are they doing up there?" It was the dean, himself, who said this. But his question did not cut off his wife from telling what she knew of her grand children's plans. It was very apparent she was not going to tell anything.

"I have no idea," said Hollis.

The dean had leaned forward in his seat so his shoulders were over the steering wheel and his face was almost touching the windshield. The rest of the party broke off their chatter to follow his gaze. What they saw was Moose nudging the footlocker with his toe.

A little noise came from Rugger's throat, then he said, "Why that thing is completely empty."

"It can't be," said Hollis.

Roy was surprised at the tone of his brother-in-law's voice. It sounded like genuine astonishment. With mixed feelings he realized Hollis was a better liar than he was.

Moose had picked up the piece of luggage and was shaking it. The other policeman was reaching in his pocket for a huge key ring, and he began fumbling through his thick collection to find a skeleton key that would pick a cheap footlocker.

The dean did not like what he was seeing at all. His muscles had tensed, and his breathing had become snorts. "Empty," he whispered. Then in more audible tones he said, "Who did this? Who had the nerve to pull this trick off?" As he spoke he turned around to glare at the circle of people near him to see if he could spot signs of guilt on any face. "Emptied out," he said. This was a man who probably muttered to himself quite often. "This won't do at all."

"Patience, dear," said his wife. "There could be something in the lining. Let the officers find it. After all it's the dope that our side wants. That other stuff won't help us any." She spoke as though she didn't care whether she was being overheard or not. Or perhaps she was challenging the listeners to do anything about it.

"We have no idea what is coming off," said Hollis. "But if there's anything we can do to help you out we will. My wife, Roy and I, all of us want to do the right thing--"

The dean snorted. "I'll fix you," he said. And he pushed his car door open so quickly that it almost caught Hollis with a broadside blow to his stomach. But the Captain's reflexes were marvelous, and he managed to step aside without getting so much as a button brushed. In fact he grabbed on to the swinging handle and held it as though he himself were opening the door for the dean.

Rugger paid no attention to him whatever. In a half dozen strides he was even with the police prowler and was bending down to talk to the man in the backseat. As he did so his wife quit brushing at gnats and sat motionless. Her eyes were fixed on her husband and the man in the back seat of the police car.

Up ahead the police had opened the footlocker. The crowd was reacting to the empty contents, and Moose was unfolding a pocket knife. In a moment he bent over the empty luggage. It looked like he was making slashing motions with his hands. Then he tore out a big piece of lining and tossed it aside. More slashing motions.

The dean was talking earnestly to the man in the police car's back seat. The man had turned around several times to look over the people still standing around the dean's car. But as far as Roy could tell the hotel clerk did not actually catch his eye. The dean was getting impatient and the clerk was shaking his head. Mrs. Rugger began swatting gnats again. Roy began to relax, but Hollis was still quite poker faced.

The woman from the brown boarding house, the one who had bounced on to Sprague about emptying his ash tray stode from her back door and went down to join the policeman. When she got there Moose had torn out several more pices of lining and was looking at what he had done as though he were about to give up. Everyone in the block must have heard the woman's shrill voice as she spoke to the policeman.

"If you all want to search my garbage can you can go right ahead and do so. If that man was low enough to empty his nasty old cigarette butts in it he might have hid something else there. Go ahead. Look in it."

Moose paid no attention to her as he folded up his knife. He sighed and kicked at the empty luggage, now stripped of its lining. Disappointment showed on both Mr. and Mrs. Sollers' faces. The Spragues looked down the alley to scrutinize Roy and Hollis. The lawyer pulled out another cigarette. His wife

lit it for him. A window closed some where. A moment later a door slammed shut. The dean turned disgustedly away from the hotel clerk sitting in the police car and strode back to his blue sedan. Paying no attention at all to Hollis he got in. However, he did not ignore Roy. As he settled in his seat and gripped the steering wheel he gave the Grover boy a dirty look. Immediately he pressed the starter button and raced his motor as though he were going some where. Of course he was hemmed in and could not. Angrily he stuck his head out the window and yelled at Sprague in accents not in the least academic, "The party's over. Get your crate out of the way. Let's go home."

Sprague and his wife slowly came back toward the group that had never joined the suitcase searchers. As Sprague smoked he kicked at pebbles in the alley. Sollers was talking to the policeman, but his wife had gone back inside her boarding house. The man in the back seat of the prowler car lit a cigarette. You could see its smoke curling up, but you could see nothing of the man's face. He wasn't going to look at anybody any more, and he wasn't going to talk any more.

"We'll be glad to talk with you this afternoon," said Hollis. He was bending down so he could speak face to face with the dean. "I believe Roy has an appointment with you. I'm sure we can get something straightened out."

"Shit," said the dean. His wife kept swatting at gnats.

"Roy will cooperate, I'm sure," said Hollis.

Sprague tipped his hat as he passed Roy. In a moment he had his Packard started. As soon as the alley's mouth was cleared the dean shot his blue car out like a paper dart. The party was, indeed, over--at least for him.

In a few second's time the police car had also cleared out leaving no vehicles at all where a few minutes before the thoroughfare had been choked with parked wheels. Only the group associated with Roy remained, and Mr. McKay quickly said, "It's getting so warm. It looks like we'll be in for a scorcher today. I'll just take Gregory and go home. The boys haven't been feeling up to snuff the last few days."

If he left that meant Roy would be alone with Hollis and Rena. "What about the footlocker?" Roy said quickly. "Aren't you--well, aren't you going to take what's left of it? It's still Tolliver's. You wanted me to give it to you in person. I'll--I'll let you have it."

McKay glanced at the gutted footlocker left spread open on the Soller's backyard weeds. "Pless you," he said. "We'll just forget about it. Nice meeting you, Captain Pease. And you, Mrs. Pease. We didn't get introduced formally, and if we meet again I hope it will be under more pleasant circumstances. If the drama department can be of an assistance please feel free to drop by the office and discuss things with me. Good morning, Roy."

If he had had a hat, and if he had had one of his hands free he would have tipped it. But the sun, which was not yet really warm, beat down on his white brow as he pressed the little boy closer to his chest and walked back toward his cream colored convertible.

Crover felt forlorn because Hollis was already drawing himself up to full height and saying, "Well, Roy--" and Rena was saying, "Oh dear, let's not have a row."

It turned out that McKay did not leave at once. He had

trouble getting the "White Ghos " started. A couple of tries with the starter and it flooded out forcing the professor to go around to the radiator, lift up the hood and try to see what was wrong. Apparently he didn't find the seat of the trouble because he kept alternately grinding on the starter and lifting up the hood while the Grover family had their conference.

It commenced with Hollis stating to his wife, "There won't be a row, Dear. A row is completely unnecessary and would settle nothing. All that is needed is a few intelligent words and things will be straightened out."

"I'm sorry," said Rena. "I was thinking of what Roy would say. You two don't know each other very well, and I love you both." She began to cry, but did not stop talking. The sobs came out between the words and phrases. "Roy, did you see how that dean's wife looked at me? It was like when we were kids, and people in Grass Prairie used to make fun of us because we were poor. I can't stand that kind of look. Why it would have been so easy to make friends with her. I've gotten along well with people much higher up than she is. And here she was looking at me like I was some kind of bug crawling out from under a cow chip. Roy, I do hope you'll do what Hollis says. You see how much he's done for you already. This awful footlocker thing cleared completely up. He can keep you in school for the rest of the semester. He may even get you back in that play you were rehearsing last night--"

"No," said Hollis flatly. "We shouldn't go back in that fool play. This acting stuff looks bad. Give it up. You've got to tell the dean you've decided to change majors, change into something that will lead to a sensible job, something that



will help the war effort. I've got to talk to you about the war effort. I can't explain to you in front of Rena, but you have to understand that your best bet with the dean is to appear willing and eager to enter the armed services when your time comes up to do so."

Roy opened his mouth to say something. Rena said, "Hush, Roy. Now listen to me, Hollis. You cannot keep things from me any longer. You know I have guessed what the matter is already. I told you I love you both. That's the truth, no matter what comes up. I don't want you two fighting. Roy, I'm not going to let you have a row. Hollis, you can't just order Roy to do things like he was a buck private in the Army. You let me talk to him."

"I'm sorry, dear," said Hollis. "You're right. It's better that you talk to him."

Rena said, "First let's go down and pick up that awful bit of luggage that's lying out like junk that bums have strowed around. Then Roy and I are going to take it back to his room. Hollis, you don't understand it, but Roy's going to have trouble facing the people in that boarding house. I know what you think, that it's good enough for him, that he ought to be forced into living it down. But I know Roy better than that. He won't do it. He'll find some way to worm out of it, and the first thing you and I know he'll be gone, completely out of town, and it'll take us months to catch up with him. Now then if I go back with him inside the boarding house nobody's going to get very smart, not with me along. Come on, Roy, let's get the footlocker, then let's walk around to the front of the house and enter the street door like we're supposed to."

She took Roy by the arm and advanced a few steps toward the distant piece of luggage. It looked as though Hollis would keep his mouth shut, fade into the background and re-appear at the Buick after his wife had had time to play her part to completion. But after a half-dozen steps he called softly to Rena. "Our appointments," he said. "You'll try to get out in time for us to make some sort of order out of our morning's schedule, won't you?"

Rena sighed and turned to look at him. "You'll have to get to a phone and call up the housing office out at the fort. Try to get the address of the first house on their list. Tell them we'll meet them there, wherever it is. You may have to cancel with Major Bradley about the conference on the rest home. Tell Mrs. Bradley I'll speak to her about our furniture tonight. Yes, we can keep our dinner date with them. I'll squeeze that in some way. We can give up the luncheon date and make it to the railroad station to pick up our sewing machine and your golf clubs. If there's no pay phone close why don't you just go in to Roy's boarding house like nothing had happened and ask that horrible old woman to use her phone? It'll help get things back to normal."

"Well," said Hollis. "Well, we might be able to find us a house yet. If not, tomorrow's another day. Try to remember all the things we have to cram into the next twenty-four hours while you're talking to Roy."

Roy, who had been thinking of his own schedule, of his plan to contact Beulah Astor before she left town, also wanted to hurry things up. But he knew he must be quiet. The faintest restlessness on his part would stir up Rena to start quizzing

him. His sister would not stop until she had pried his most secret plans out of him. That was probably one of the reasons she was offering to accompany him back inside the boarding house. What a messed-up assortment of feelings he had about her, about Hollis, about all his relatives. If only he were free of them all.

What a triumph it would be if he could get a job with Beulah Astor. He would not let himself admit this might be a silly dream. To step straight out of this disgrace into a contract with a legitimate acting company--what a glorious victory that would be.

But he had sense enough to know his chances of getting it were slim. After all, anyone with any sense knew the acting profession was the hardest nut in the world to crack. Beulah had probably already left town. Even if she were still around she might laugh at his assumption that he was ready for the professional stage. What were a few complements from friends? A cold, money-paying audience might think he stinks. Reason told him if he ran off to Houston or Denver or wherever Magda Cowles and Beulah Astor were playing the chances were he would have to wire home for money before the week was out. He would be nothing but a flat-broke, hungry, out-cast homosexual. Such a defeat might be very hard to take. He had to face the fact he was a country hick from Grass Prairie.

He needed time to think. If only he had mailed a letter to his father asking for money a week ago instead of yesterday. If only it were seven-thirty in the morning instead of fifteen after eight. At twenty after eight his mother would be leaving her apartment on her way to teach her first-graders. It would

be four o'clock before he could reach her by phone and ask her to wire some money.

A crisis always turned up when he was penniless. The wings he must have to fly away seemed always due to arrive a few days too late.

Who else might help him out? Would that Prissy busy-body, Professor McKay be good for a loan? There he was back behind, still fiddling with his ridiculous automobile. You could smell his flooded gas fumes clear over the hedge to the alley.. A loan from him would be as un-likely as a job from Beulah Astor. Forget him.

What if he were to meet up with "John" again? What if he could get ahold of Larry Thorpe himself instead of his wife? They might give him enough money to track down Beulah Astor if bad luck whisked her out of his grasp this morning. After all, it looked like he was about to squirm out of both the sex charge and that frightful mess about narcotics.. Free. He was on the verge of being free.

That was right. If he used his head everything might be back to normal in a day or two. The University had one scape-goat, Tolliver. Only temporary hysteria was forcing them to look for another. If he laid low things could blow over. He could be back attending classes. He might even get his part back in the play. He would be an ordinary freshman again, just about to round out his first, successful, year in college.

When Rena reached the footlocker she bent down to examine the scattered wreckage. As she picked up a bit of lining, a thin printed cloth with a heavy glue backing, she cried and rubbed it tenderly, as though it were a slashed heirloom.

"A shame. A terrible shame," she said. "A pretty piece of cloth. Mama once made a quilt of some material almost like this. Do you remember, Roy?"

Then she touched the frame of the footlocker itself, aluminum that had been riveted together with brass corner binders. The brass lock had been pried off and now flopped on one loosened rivet like a broken wing on a floundering bird.

"--and the locker," she said. "Who knows what was in it? You don't know, do you, Roy?"

There she was, crying while she asked questions. It was so hard to lie to her, but what else could he do? "I just kicked it a time or two. It's hard to tell what's in it from a kick."

"I mean there wasn't any of that dope, was there?"

"I don't know. How could I know?" On that point he was truthful. If dope came in quantities small enough to hide in wrinkled clothing he did not know.

Rena did not press the question. She just kept rubbing at the dents on the footlocker and testing the warped lid to see if it would still close. "All those people. The police and everything. Who knows what they wanted. Who cares. Forget it all, Roy. Don't try to figure it out. Just stay on top of it. Now let's get this thing closed and carry it back in the house in a dignified manner. If anyone asks you why you are keeping it you pretend nothing has happened. Just say a friend gave it to you for safe keeping, and naturally you are hanging on to it until he tells you other wise. If you don't hear from that Tolliver again slip it out in the alley some dark night and cram it in a garbage can." It seemed the Peases liked to cover

things up in garb ge cans.

They had a little argument when it came to closing the lid. None of the three latches on it would work, and Roy wanted to wire the whole thing shut with some thin wire he saw hanging on the outside wall of the tool shed. But Rena hissed, "Don't touch it. That wire isn't yours."

"It's just wire," said Roy. "Nobody's going to keep you from taking a piece of wire, are they?"

"Hush. You just want to have your way. You're the contrariest little devil I've ever seen. Haven't you got sense enough to stay out of trouble?"

The lid would not stay shut if it were jiggled the least bit, and as they proceeded around the side of the house toward the front door it kept flopping open and banging Roy's shins.

"I'm going back and wire it shut," he said.

"Don't you dare. Think of all the trouble we've gone to to get you out of this, and you want to ruin it all with a fool move like that. Roy, you've got to use your head. You can't go blundering through the world without a single thought about what other people might do. I don't mean you run from people, but use your head. Stay on top. Come on."

As they passed the dining room window he thought he saw someone peeking from behind the lace curtains. When they were near the front corner of the house they were surprised to hear the front door slam, and a second later Hollis came around the corner of the house to meet them. Apparently he had taken Rena's advice and had gone inside to use the phone. Now he was rushing to meet them to report a new development along entirely different lines.

"Roy," Hollis said, "You have a long distance call. I had come in, talked with Mrs. Sollers, and was just reaching for the receiver when the phone rang. Naturally, I stepped back so your landlady could answer it. It turned out to be the operator at Gloriona. A person to person call for you. It must be your mother. Mrs. Sollers told me to rush out and get you. So if you'll hurry you can get on the receiver right now, and we can find out what this is about."

No one in the Grover family would waste money on a long distance call except for an emergency. Roy rushed inside heading toward the dining room and the downstairs phone. As he hurried along a little thought crossed his mind, a feeling of relief. Captain Pease had, indeed, taken the bull by the horns and had found an excuse to confront the Sollers couple at once. He must have put his super diplomacy to work because in only a few moment's time the landlady had sent him on the errand of calling Roy to the phone. Nice looking relatives can be such a help in times of crisis. Who can think you are an outcast if your own brother-in-law is a polished, clean-cut charmer in uniform?

But when he reached the dining room he did not find Mrs. Sollers completely subdued. First, breakfast was still being served. Ordinarily it would be over by this hour, but many students had slept in this morning thinking they would be "striking" instead of attending class. Quite a few stragglers were still munching on their toast. Only one of them, a red-headed kid known for his lack of tact, looked at Roy. The rest suddenly became busy with their napkin or else looked out the window. Marvin Bates ducked out of the dining room as soon as Roy came

in. After a moment Roy heard him in the kitchen whispering with Mr. Sollers. The landlady, herself, had moved away from the phone and was over by the window, a spouted can in hand, watering a pot of ivy.

She gave Roy a glance over her shoulder and said, "Ch". Roy noticed the receiver was dangling from the wall phone near the buffet and started toward it. Mrs. Sollers once again glanced over her shoulder and, this time, scratched her nose with her free hand. "Ch. It's you. I first thought you were that fellow in uniform coming back. Well, you're wanted on the phone." But when Roy was about to pick up the dangling receiver she added. "I forgot to tell you. Go upstairs and take it up there. The boys are still eating here in the dining room."

Immediately Mr. Sollers popped out of the kitchen and said. "No he can't take it up there. That phone's busy." His wife set down her pot, brushed her hands, and said, "That's right. Well, go ahead and take it here. I guess it's alright since it's long distance."

"I'm sure Roy will be very brief," said Hollis who had followed Roy back inside and was standing at the dining room door. At once he added. "Is that a Washington ivy? My mother grew one that was clipped off of Robert E. Lee's tomb. It hung in our dining room window just like this one is. Come on in, Rena. Isn't that ivy exactly like the one Mom has hanging beside the china closet?"

As a smiling Rena approached to give the plant a better look the landlady did not help the conversation along. All she did was pull a weed out of the pot.

"It looks exactly like it," Rena said.



Roy had trouble getting through with the operator. Somehow the connection had been cut off and he had to re-dial several times before he talked with the girl who had handled his call from Gloriona. Meantime, several boys cut their breakfasts short and left the dining room. Whispering noises still came from the kitchen. But it seemed Hollis and Rena finally had some success in warming up Mrs. Sollers. By the time the operator reopened a line to Gloriona the landlady was telling the Peases how to make plant cuttings that would take right off and grow.

"Roy, is that you?" he finally heard his mother's voice say. At once he could tell that something was wrong from her high-pitched tone, but she took part of her precious three minute's allowance to ask if he was alright. "There's something in this morning's paper about trouble at your school. But I have to tell you some sad news. It's about <sup>the</sup> Blanche's husband, Clifford Skirvin. I have to tell you he is dead--"

Mrs. Sollers had taken a grand stance with the watering can held as a pointer and was saying, "No, no, little girlie. You don't just whack them off. You soak them in water. Whack them off and stick them straight in the ground and you'll have dead plants--" The landlady was calling Rena, "little girlie", and Rena was appearing absorbed and answering, "Really?" Roy wanted to stop them and tell them the news. Cliff Skirvin being dead was too much for him to bear alone. But his mother apparently did not know Hollis and Rena were there, and she was quickly cramming in the details before her three minutes were up.

"--He did not come out from under the ether. Blanche

took it awful hard and had to break down and cry when she called me on the phone. She wanted me to notify everybody because she just couldn't stand up to telling the whole family. Poor girl, away out west and alone and has to get her dead husband's body back to Oklahoma for burial. Of course the military will help her out. For my part I feel like he gave his life for his country just as much as if he died in battle--"

Hollis and Rena seemed to sense that something was wrong, and they were casting glances over toward the phone. Mrs. Sollers, however, was making it quite clear that it took experience, horse-sense and hard work to keep house plants looking healthy.

"They aren't going to bury him at Argylle. Instead they're going to put him to rest at Pitts, where his mother's buried. You know Pitts is just ten miles from Grass Prairie. Blanche didn't know how long it would take to get the body back to Oklahoma. Poor girl. She'll have to call me again as soon as the arrangements are settled. Now if Rena and Hollis show up in Fort Boomer I want you to tell me just as soon as they do. What with it being war time our family is so scattered around. Now, don't worry about the price of the call. Call me collect. It's terrible that I don't even know for sure where Rena is when something like this comes up--"

"She's here, Mama. Right here. I'll let her talk to you."

Both Hollis and Rena suddenly stopped talking to Mrs. Sollers. Rena did not have to be beckoned to the phone. She came right over, picked up the receiver and said, "Hello, Mama, it's me." As her face became grave Hollis slowly came to her elbow in hopes he could pick up a few words from the instrument as they came over the wire. Even Mrs. Sollers dropped her declamatory pose and looked softly toward the group at

the phone. The landlady remained kindly throughout Rena's conversation, and soon she advanced a little closer and asked, "Somebody's dead, isn't it? Was he overseas? My sister's oldest boy is still missing down in the Philippines. Some people think he'd be better off dead than captured by the Japs. But I can't believe that. If the Japs have got them there's a chance we can get them back, and if they're dead nothing comes back but a coffin. My husband has a second cousin who was killed outright at Pearl Harbor. There's no bringing him back. And now we've got all this going on down in New Guinea and those Pacific atolls--"

One of the diners who had been on the verge of slinking out stopped and said he had a brother who went down with a ship just two weeks ago. "He was in the merchant marine."

"The men in the merchant marine have got as much right to respect as the ones in uniform. That's my opinion," said Mrs. Sollers. "It's gettin' bad out on the oceans, and it's going to get worse. I sure think our boys deserve the best, and I hate to hear it when one of them goes."

Rena was saying, "--We'll ~~keep~~ in touch with you," and "--Hollis will try to contact Blanche before she leaves California with the--the remains. Hollis will know how to speed things up. Yes, it sounds like he will be buried about Friday. Yes, we'll all get up to Pitts for the funeral. Yes, all of us. It would be a shame to fail to be there. Don't worry about where we'll stay. Hollis can probably get the military to pay for lodging for at least some of us. If not we can stay with Papa over in Grass Prairie. It can't be more than a half hour's drive from Papa's place to Pitts."

Hollis insisted on getting on the phone and he gave his sympathy to Mrs. Grover. "I'll get in contact with Cliff's commanding officer in California, and if there's anything I can do I'll do my bit to help out. Now don't worry about the price of this call. Possibly it can be charged to Traveler's Aid or maybe even outright to the Military Dependent's Fund. We'll check into everything here on this end of things. Good-bye, Mother, and it looks like we'll be seeing you this weekend. We'll call you just as soon as we learn the date of the body's arrival in Pitts."

As he hung up Mrs. Sollers began rubbing her hands together. She avoided asking again if the deceased were an overseas victim since it was now obvious that he had been in California. "Jeep accidents," she said. They're terrible things. Taking about as many of our boys as bullets. It's bad to loose them in training. In some ways worse than in battle."

The Pease's wanted to leave rather quickly and tended to soft-peddle the landlady's talkative streak. However, they were careful to take leave politely. When they were at the front door Hollis promised Roy he would drop by just before lunch time. "We'll know a whole lot more then than we do now," was his all-inclusive comment. "Tell you what. You can tell Mrs. Sollers that you won't be here for the noon meal. It's time you had a snack with Rena and I. This spot they call 'The Plantation' sounds nice. See you about a quarter to twelve, and we'll have more plans firmed up by then."

His last sentence also seemed to cover a great deal of ground. He was careful to include a "Nice to see you again, Mrs. Sollers," as he and Rena went out the door.

Mrs. Sollers kept rubbing her hands together as she watched the Pease's walk out to the Buick then drive away. Roy was about to go upstairs to his room when she turned to him and said, "This man who died, he wasn't really your brother was he?"

"No, a brother-in-law. My sister's husband."

"Oh, for a moment I thought it was someone closer to you than that. And he did not die in training, or did he?"

"I didn't get the whole story over the phone, but I think some Army doctors operated on him for stomach trouble, something like ulcers."

"Oh, ulcers," said Mrs. Sollers. "Well, it's nice that everything is being done. This Captain here let on like the military would pay for everything." At this point Mr. Sollers appeared at the top of the stairs. His presence there was very surprising. Not only was it a mystery just how he had gotten from the kitchen to the upstairs without Roy noticing it, but he had Roy's suitcase in one hand and a large pasteboard box in the other. The big box was tied with twine string so he could bump it down the stairs by a loop at the top. As Roy watched he lowered it down the first bump.

Grover realized what was happening. Some how Mr. Sollers had slipped past them while they were phoning in the dining room. Probably it was during one of the moments his wife was being most talkative about the horrors of war. He had slipped upstairs, packed Roy's things, and was now moving them out. Of course he had waited until Captain Pease and his wife had left.

Immediately Roy took a double step upstairs. He slipped and fell back one full riser. His jaw had dropped with surprise and given his face a ludicrous expression. "No you don't," he

said, "You don't move me out. Dirty, dirty. You're a dirty rotten bunch to pull this on me. Dirty for being so goody-goody."

He did not have time to fully recover from the slip he had made through trying to jump two steps in one. As he screamed Mr. Sollers calmly continued bumping his box downstairs. Before he could take a second step someone with a strong hand grabbed him by the collar. The same person's other hand clutched the seat of his pants and lifted him in a bum's rush. Grover was barely able to turn around and see that his attacker was Marvin Bates. Bates, amazingly strong for someone with a heavy library pallor, was about to push him through the front door when Mrs. Sollers spoke up and said, "No, no. You can let him down. Roy's not going to fight you back. I can tell. He's not the type. He may scream a lot, but screams don't bring blood. Roy, you've got to go. There ain't no point in beating around the bush. I'm sorry, but we just can't keep you here. The other boy's parents wouldn't stand for it. You got too many funny friends. You got nothing to worry about anyway. Your dad lives up in Oklahoma where they're striking all that oil. Your brother-in-law was bragging about it last night. Your dad might be rich some day. You go talk to the dean, the one your brother-in-law was so hot to strike up a conversation with. He'll get you a room some where."

In a split second Bates had set his suitcase and box beside him in the porch. In another split second the door was closed.

Roy whirled and started to kick at the door. But through its upper glass panel he could see Bates standing less than a foot away. Mrs. Sollers, with her hands on her hips, was right behind him. Her husband, now all the way down the stairs, stood on the bottom step laughing.

The laughter was harder to take than Bates's bouncer scowl. It made Roy seem so little, someone so easily evicted you could laugh him off. In a moment Bates dropped his scowl and began laughing also. Then he turned away from the door flapping his wrist in a mock girlish exaggeration. His job was finished, and he knew it.

Roy thought of throwing a rock through one of the front windows and even looked around to find one. But he saw no rocks in the Soller's ragged looking front lawn. He knew he wouldn't throw it even if one were there. About that time he heard one of the dining room windows open and something plunk on the grass around the side of the house. Even as the sound struck his ear drums he had a feeling what it was. When he stumbled around the corner of the house to look his feeling was confirmed. Bates had, again, thrown the footlocker out a window. This time the lid came off completely, and it lay exposed to the bright morning air.

So he was thrown out. No time to call a lawyer, no time to call the dean nor even the police. With a smooth slick operation he and his baggage were pushed out of the house. The ones who had done it knew they could get by with it. A lawyer, a dean and two policemen had just come and gone. It was easy to see they were not coming back in defense of Roy. Yes, it made his blood boil, but those inside the house would only laugh at his frustration.

Damn Hollis and Rena for leaving so soon. Double damn them for thinking he could pick up his boarding house life as though nothing had happened. What would he do? He barely had

enough money in his pocket for a cup of coffee. The Sollers's had thrown him out before he had had a chance to gulp down some breakfast. Students hurrying along the sidewalks reminded him he should now be in class if he were to return to the University as a model student. If he went crying down to the Palace Hotel he would probably find the Pease's not there. They would be out picking up their sewing machines and golf clubs, or would be frantically rushing about town, kissing the right asses to make the troubles they had run into come out right.

Just then he heard a noise behind him, the faintest little rustle. It might have been a robin hopping over the lawn, but it made him whirl around and look. The little McKay kid was there, the little five year old, red-headed, foster son with the un-Texan name of Gregory.

He held a folded piece of paper in his hand. That is he held it for a second but dropped it before Roy could figure out what was going on. As soon as he dropped it he grinned a little bit, stuck his finger in his mouth, then turned around and ran off.

Roy had enough presence of mind to be very casual about picking up the dropped note. Many eyes, from all sides, would be watching him. If McKay had sent his little boy with a message instead of coming himself it meant he didn't want to risk direct contact with someone who had just been thrown out of a boarding house.

Quickly he slipped the piece of paper in his pocket without reading it. Then he started to pick up the two pieces of the much battered footlocker.

He stopped. No. He would not pick it up. It was silly



to fool with this empty shell, this thing that had caused him so much trouble. Leave it right there for the Sollerses to dispose of. Then without consciously looking toward the brown boarding house and its hedge on the distant corner he went back to the front porch, placed his suitcase and box neatly to one side of the door and walked away. As he did so he heard a car start down on the other side of the hedge.. Then the yellow "white ghost" rounded the corner. McKay, with his little boy pressed close to him in the front seat, sped across the intersection toward Vaca Street.

The note, when he was far enough away from his scene of eviction to safely read it, said, "I'll be at the Triple X at eleven-fifteen".

The Triple X at eleven-fifteen. Roy, of course, knew where the Triple X drive-in was, north of the campus, well away from the daytime haunts of students. A quick review of the Drama Department's class schedule told him McKay was cramming in this out-of-sight meeting between his Directing Ib and Advanced Lighting classes.

Roy needed to think. Still infuriated at being thrown out like a bum he was, however, frightened enough to realize he must not lose his head. A meeting with McKay at eleven-fifteen would mean he must cut his History of the Theater class. Yes, many students would be cutting classes today, but if he wanted to get back in the good graces of the authorities it would be smart to attend them all. Besides, sitting in a classroom taking notes seemed like such a quiet, ordinary thing to do, so completely different from walking the streets without a home you could call your own nor a dollar in your pocket.

On the other hand a meeting with McKay would be nice too. It was up-lifting, even thrilling, just to think of it. Why, that old man must like him, probably wanted to get in bed with him. Coming at a time like this the knowledge that someone liked you enough to wait behind a hedge and send you a note was comforting, indeed. True, McKay had not been the classic hero and rushed to his defense the moment he was given the bum's rush. All the professor had done was send his little stepson with a note. Yet even that was nice.

But what the hell. It was now a quarter to nine. His French class was almost over. Eleven-fifteen was eons away. If he dallied he would even miss his Speech and Movement for the Stage class coming up in a quarter of an hour. Breakfast or no breakfast he must get back to school, the safe, sensible, comforting class room where he could show the world he could take it without running away.

In fact, he began running toward, not away from the campus. He ran to the Modern Language Building and entered his French Class when it had only five minutes to go. Someone giggled as he sat down, and the professor dryly remarked that he was "a little late". Nevertheless, he was there in time to get in on the tail-end of the conversation exercises.

"Where do your parents live?" the girl behind him asked in French. He lied a little bit when he replied, "Ils vivent a Gloriona, Oklahoma." After all, this was only a grammatical exercise. Why bring up the point that they lived in two different places?

In his Speech and Movement for the Stage class Miss Sorenson, as usual, behaved quite correctly. You would not know from

the brisk way she started class that anything unusual was going on at the University. The dismissal of Schein might never have occurred, and, of course, she gave not the slightest indication that anything had happened to Roy's status as a student nor as a member of the cast of the current play. They were doing "Mary had a little lamb" in four emotions, anger, joy, sorrow and fear. Perhaps it was significant that she asked Roy to perform first, perhaps it was not.

The truth was he did not do well, especially with the emotions of sorrow and joy. But Miss Sorenson was kindly in her criticisms and calmly called the next performer.

Roy did not stay the entire hour in the Speech and Movement for the Stage class. As the period rolled on the spring sun climbed higher in the sky and heated the windows on the south side of the room. When one of the girls was doing "fear" Roy tip-toed over and opened one of them. Miss Sorenson frowned slightly, otherwise she strayed no further away from her intense analysis of the exercise taking place on the classroom's little stage. Grover returned to his seat and looked at his wrist watch. He could not stay still. A few moments later he glanced at his watch again and noticed the time was nine-thirty. During the next five minutes he glanced at his watch several times. While one of the boys was doing "Joy" he rose and cautiously tip-toed over to Miss Sorenson and whispered, "I don't feel well. Excuse me." She gasped, but he did not wait for her to say anything. He continued his noiseless tip-toe to the door, carefully opened it, went out and carefully closed it.

Then he rushed down the hall passed the room where Mr.

McKay was holding his "Advanced Problems in the Theater" class and entered the elevator. An agonizing two minutes later he was outside.

He must run to a phone booth. The nearest one was in the library. How stupid of him to go to classes, as meekly as Mary's little lamb, when he should have been checking to see if Beulah Astor was still in town. After all, students cut classes all the time, and on a troubled day like this an absence would certainly be forgiven. A man headed for a life in the theater was foolish to leave even the most unlikely stone unturned.

His first attempt to place a call was a severe disappointment. The other end didn't even ring. Instead the operator came on and asked, "What number were you dialing, Please?"

Roy gave the number of Beulah's apartment.

"That number has been disconnected," said the operator.

When he dialed Dol Abbot's number the other end sounded, but after ten rings no one had answered it.

Then he dialed the airport. "The early plane to Denver," he asked. "was it on time?"

"Yes," the ticket clerk answered, but there was something strange in the tone of his voice. Roy was about to hang up when he thought he had better inquire further. "Did everyone get on it?" After all, this was war time and many ticket holders without priority got bumped. "I'm afraid not. The whole flight was taken up with emergency tickets. That's all I'm allowed to tell you," was the reply.

For Roy that was wonderful news. But where was Beulah? Quickly he asked the clerk if he would page Miss Beulah Astor.

She could very easily be waiting in the lobby. But minutes went by. The operator asked him if he was still on the line. Finally, the ticket clerk came on the phone and told Grover that no one answered his page call.

Ten minutes of brisk walking got him to Beulah's apartment. The place didn't seem to fit her. Roy had pictured her living either in an ultra modern, glass brick creation or in something incredibly makeshift such as the restuccoed attic of a Victorian mansion. She lived in neither. The address she had turned in to the faculty roster turned out to be a new four-plex built between a boarding house and a private home with a high fence around it. Since it was a hodge-podge neighborhood the plain brick building with its four front doors neither blended in nor clashed. If someone were unexpectedly transferred to Fort Boomer this was the sort of place he would rent on the spot until he could find something better.

As he rushed into the gravel turnaround, eyes straining so he could read the name plates on the four mail boxes, a taxi drove up. He wouldn't have bothered to look and see who it was if a familiar voice hadn't called to him. It was Dol Abbot.

"Boy. You there. I've forgotten your name. Have you got a dollar? The driver can't break a twenty," she said.

A foolish question. No student had dollar bills to casually give away. He started to ignore her then realized he might need her assistance. "No, sorry," he said.

"Well, have you got a five? The driver can break a five."

She was getting even more ridiculous. He threw up his hands and blew out a breath. But he did not get away from her. Suddenly, her eyes narrowed, and completely leaving the driver,

she ran over and caught Roy by the elbow. "You aren't looking for Beulah, are you?"

He said, "Yes," and she wanted to know what he wanted her for. Then before he could answer she turned to the taxi driver and said, "Wait." Then taking Roy by the arm she strode toward the door at the end. "Let's both knock on her door. You call, and I'll knock. If she's holed up in her own apartment and won't answer her phone I'm going to pull her hair out."

However, several calls and knockings produced nothing. Dol stomped her feet. Again she demanded Roy tell her what in the blessed world had brought him to Beulah Astor's door.

"I'm going to ask her for a job. So there," he said.

Her jaw dropped then she burst out laughing. "A job? From Beulah? I can tell you in one short sentence. Beulah does not give jobs. They are forced out of her only after she's tried wooden puppets, brass robots and optical illusions. Human beings she hates. Where in the world could that bitch be? She's not at the airport. The early flight she missed. ~~not.~~ Yes, it loaded up and took off with Army colonels. But Beulah wasn't even there when the civilians got told no. When this girl saw that she got busy. Can you guess where I called? Denver. The performance for Snows of Torment has been cancelled tonight. This girl knows what that means, and this girl's going to get to the bottom of it."

Again she started pounding on the door.

Roy said he had an idea. But he didn't have any money to pay for taxi fares. His idea was that Beulah might be at a certain ex-opera singer's house. Dol looked him in the eye and said, "Never mind the cost of fares. Let's go."

They did not go far. The taxi only pulled away from the curb when they realized the right rear tire had gone flat. Dol gnashed her teeth. The taxi driver slowly got out, looked at it and said, "It's war time lady. My spare ain't so good either."

"I know it's war time. I've read the papers," said Dol. Then to Roy she said, "How far away is this opera singer?"

"About thirty blocks. Fifty-first St.," he replied.

"Oh God," said Dol. Then she settled back on the cushion. "Accept the inevitable. It won't do any good to phone another cab company. There's no more of an excess of cabs than there is tires. We patiently wait until he gets his poor old spare on."

But her acceptance of the inevitable was not done very calmly. While the driver changed tires she fidgeted, fumed, and she told Roy he dressed like a hick. "How much did that pair of pants cost? I'll bet not over three dollars. You might as well wear the price tag. There isn't a theatrical booking agent in New York who can't tell it's a Sears Roebuck special as far as he can see it. And you want to be an actor. Did you ever hear of costuming?"

"I can't afford anything else," said Roy.

"That's no excuse whatever," said Dol. "How old are you? No, don't tell me. I can guess that too. You are about one month from the age at which the Army will snap you up whether you want to go or not."

"I won't be eighteen until July. They're still taking only nineteen year olds."

"They aren't today. But wait until you hear what congress does tomorrow. And between now and July you expect to work your way to the top levels of Broadway. Do you have anything wrong

with you? Will you pass the physical?"

"I don't know," he said.

"You don't know? What do you mean?" Her last question fell to a whisper, and she looked him over closely. Both of them glanced out the window to the driver unscrewing a wheel lug not more than two feet away.

Dol lowered her voice. "Never mind answering," she said. "Roll up the window. I can't smoke when it's windy." She began opening her hand bag as though fumbling for a cigarette. "Oh hell," she said. "I haven't got one. Do you have a pack of camels by any chance?"

"I don't smoke," he said.

"Oh God. And you want to be an actor."

At last the taxi was on its way. By the time they approached Dolores' and Vinnie's house Dol had calmed down. When it came time to look the little cottage over she was as well in control of the situation as a real estate man.

"Sardines," she said. "Sardines packed in the sauce of a hick town. Such is the ghastly fate of cast-off opera singers."

Roy was not looking at the house. He was looking at Vinnie. The fact that Mrs. Dollop was out in the yard feverishly spading a ragged corner of the lawn meant something was going on inside the house that she couldn't stand. It might mean Dolores was practicing in her little padded cubby hole. Possibly it could mean something was going on on a padded mattress. This time Roy hoped it was the mattress.

Miss Abbot still faced the problem of changing a twenty dollar bill even though by now the meter registered well over



sic dollars. With reckless bravery she sought an easy solution. "Yoo-hoo," she called to Vinnie. "You in the blue, home-made bonnet. I have no idea what your name is. Can you change a twenty dollar bill?"

Vinnie's reaction almost sent Dol back into a case of jitters. Almost, but not quite. The stakes were too high for her to afford the luxury of going to pieces. She managed to appear as serene as Egyptian tomb-statuary throughout Mrs. Dollops's irrelevant tirade.

Vinnie threw down her spade then looked with bulging eyes at the new arrivals in the taxi. When she saw them her eyes hardened into slits. She picked up her spade mid-ways along the handle and stomped over to the taxi. With only a quick, dirty glance at the two people in the back seat she began telling her dammed-up troubles to the driver.

"I'm a poor old widow woman forced to live with a no-good sister. I've tried and tried to make her straighten up and live like a human being. It don't do no good. I've got rheumatism in three fingers on my right hand and the thumb of my left hand. My heart palpitates every night, and my legs cramp after each meal as regular as sun-up and sun-down. My sister no more pays attention to my condition than she does to a cur cat running up and down the alley. Any lap dog in town has far more consideration poured on it than my sister ever pays to me--"

"Have you got change for a twenty?" Dol broke in.

"--The hussies that traipse in and out of my house. Plain old hussies, every one of them. If my sister cared a thing in the world for me she would have me inside and calling a doctor.

Instead I can't enter my own house for hours on end. I have bad feet. I shouldn't be working. I have a nephew that my sister has led astray. So bad astray I can't even mention it. Nothing wholesome.. Nothing uplifting--"

"Ma'm, I'm going to have to put you on waiting time," said the taxi driver to Dol. "Unless you want to give me that bill and see if I can change it."

"No, you stay right here," said Miss Abbol. "I can't let go of a taxi just yet."

Vinnie paid little attention to Roy and Dol as they got out and advanced toward the front door. Her sister's guests were not hers, and she had a waiting taxi driver to talk to.

Again Dol suggested Roy call out while she did the knocking. Grover did not argue. He knew, of course, you weren't supposed to call out the name of your host when you went visiting at a city residence, but it was barely permissible. He did not have to be told that it had a certain advantage.

But neither calling, knocking nor ringing the doorbell brought the slightest response. Dol immediately thought of another plan. After only two knocks and two halloos she whispered, "Quick, around to the back door. This place has got a back door, hasn't it? Lead me to it. I know what I'm doing."

As soon as they rounded the rear corner which gave them a view of the back yard Roy stopped and gasped. Dol, not in the least surprised, merely looked puzzled, then said, "Hmph. No time to stop now." Then she brushed passed the man who was hurrying down the cement flagstones, whizzed on by the garbage can, took the two back steps in one jump and barged right inside the back entrance.

The man hurrying down the flagstones was Larry Thorpe. When he found himself face to face with Roy he showed little discomfiture. He did not gasp, stammer nor drop his jaw. Perhaps he had done some of that inside the house when he heard the doorbell ring then somehow discovered that the visitor was a cast-off lover. But now he only had a slightly sheepish grin on his face, one that showed up his dimples to an advantage.

"Hello, Kid," he said quite casually.

"Why, why, it's you," said Roy. By this time Dol was already inside the kitchen and had closed the door.

Thorpe put his hands in his pocket and chuckled. "Nice weather today, isn't it."

It was so confusing. A moment ago Grover was thinking he had Beulah Astor trapped. Instead he had flushed out the man he had given up all hope of seeing. And if he ever wanted to see him again he had better get some things set straight fast. "Larry," he said. "Mr. Thorpe. What do you want me to call you, Larry or Mr. Thorpe?"

"You know me well enough to call me Larry," said the man. He had now quit smiling. It was hard to read the expression on his face.

"Then, Larry, I want to tell you that I didn't sneak around the back of this house to trap you."

The expression on Mr. Thorpe's face was still hard to read. Since it, obviously, wasn't necessary to lead Grover on to get him to talk the tall man merely kept his hands in his pockets and tilted his head to one side as though he were listening.

"I had no idea you were here," said Roy

Still Larry didn't say anything..

"And I don't want to know why you are here. It's true I didn't know you were acquainted with Vinnie and Dolores, but of course you would be. They were out at River Terrace so often. I'm not asking anything about Malcolm Fox--"

"Malcolm's not here," said Thorpe. "I didn't come here to see him. Not exactly." However his blue eyes wavered slightly.

"Of course he's not here. He's in Mexico. For a cure of some sort," said Roy. When Thorpe did not make a response to this statement he continued. "I don't want to know about Malcolm. I don't want to know anything about that man called 'John'--"

"Griswald? Griswald said to tell you hello. He was sorry he couldn't speak to you when our outfit bumped into your outfit down at the warehouse. You know how it is. Griswald's not mad at you. He's a nice guy. Used to be a cop. And if you're in any sort of trouble he might be able to get you out of it. I think you ought to look John up--instead of me."

"I don't want to talk about John. And I don't want to unload any of my troubles on you. And I used to think I could string you along and get you chasing after me. I'm sorry I tried that."

Thorpe took one of his hands out of his pocket and wiped some sweat from his brow. He saw fit to change the subject. "About Malcolm. He's not in Mexico. No, he ain't here either--"

"I said I didn't want to talk about Malcolm--"

"--Malcolm's having some troubles. Down in Mexico he ended up an addict. He came back last week and tried to join the Army down in San Antonio. They wouldn't have him. He needs somebody to look after him. He's not got the level head you've

got. You're a pretty well put together kid. You can get along alright by yourself. Now about me being her at Dolores's. I had to tell her about Malcolm not getting in the Army, and about the fact that it's going to cost money to get him cured--"

"You--you know I sent you twenty-five dollars."

"Twenty-five dollars. Can't I mention the word 'money' without you harping about that?"

"I don't care anything about money. I didn't bring it up to ask for it back. I just wanted to make sure you knew who sent it."

Thorpe looked uncomfortable.

"--And I don't mind about last night. I don't mind if Georgia sent me on a wild goose chase," said Roy.

"Georgia? Did you see Georgia last night?"

"I talked to her on the phone. I--I think you were there. No, I didn't mean that. I don't care whether you were there or not."

"Look here. You're always talking about my wife. You're always bringing up things you've done, or things you claim you're not going to do. Look at yourself. You're cold blooded and money mad. You're going to school so you can make a big killing, get a soft job, rake in three or four hundred dollars a month. Why do you want to fool around with a guy like me for? I'm just asking you that? Have you ever asked yourself that? Why are you always pestering me?"

"Could I see you tonight?"

"I told you. I got to go down to San Antonio. Now, I don't mean that I'm stuck on Malcolm. Don't get me down wrong. But little Foxie needs some help right now, and you don't."

"Could I see you when you get back from San Antonio?"

"I didn't say I was going to San Antonio--"

"You did too. You said it right now. The words aren't cold yet from coming out of your mouth." This was getting sassy, something Roy had not planned to do.

"So I said I was going to San Antonio. So it's none of your business whether I am or not--"

"If you're so goody-goody about helping people out, why do you throw me over?"

Roy realized he was edging things toward a row, a cheap little bust-up like a trashy man and a floozy wife had. He was stirring up something that could get out of hand. It could lead to a fight. Some neighbor might see it going on in the back yard, call the police, and the two of them would be arrested. Getting into trouble on a day like this was one of the worst things he could do. Yet it was so hard to see Larry Thorpe walk off and out of his life. Why wouldn't Thorpe listen to him? Why couldn't this man see he wasn't cold blooded at all, but was as warm as that driveling little Fox kid ever was? If only he would be around Roy a little while he would see all that. But it looked like Thorpe didn't want to see anything.

At this moment the back door flew open, and Dol Abbol stood on the little step. "Oh, you," she said looking at Roy. "You're still here after leading me on this wild goose chase. This opera singer hasn't got anyone in the house. How would a faded, forgotten rose like that ever attract anyone into a bed room? Well, you're still here, and you've found yourself a man. Stay with him for all I care. Good-bye."

Miss Abbol brushed passed both men and disappeared around

the corner. The two men stood there looking at each other. Thorpe wiped some more sweat from his face, and Roy twiddled with a loose button on his shirt cuff. In a moment they heard a motor start and the taxi take off.

"If you don't want to see me tonight," said Roy, "if you don't want to see me when you get back from San Antonio, how about next week? Next month?"

Thorpe seemed a little calmer. Perhaps Dol's distraction had made him think. Maybe he was as worried as Roy about getting into a fight that would snarl him with the police.

"Next month is a long way off. If you want to hang around and drool over me, well go ahead and do it. I'm warning you it won't get you any where. What do you want to see me next month for?"

"I just do."

"I'm a married man. Sure I've looked around. If you think you're the first one, man or woman, that I've looked at you're mistaken. And, old Satan willing, you won't be the last--"

"Next month?" asked Roy. "I won't ask you to set a definite day. Let's just keep it next month. Any time next month."

"Keep hoping if you want to, but I'm going to walk down to the corner and catch a bus. When I get down town I'm going to work. I've told you, 'no'. If you can't understand English, well, you're peelin' the skin off your own nose. Good-bye."

Thorpe really did walk off and with a very fast pace. A couple of strides and he was around the corner.

What did he mean? He sort of mellowed there at the last. Did that mean his "no" really wasn't no? Roy stood there thinking.

He had made a fool of himself. Anyone should know that nothing is more futile than begging for love. Smart people cleverly showed themselves off until the desired object realized what he was missing. It took persistence and ingenuity. Yet it was the only way. If you jumped the gun and begged for it you were lost.

But he was leaving town. He had to beg for it. He didn't have months of time to wait until Larry Thorpe saw the light.

Or was he leaving town? What made him think he was sure to get a job even if he managed to find Beulah Astor? The chances were he would be in Fort Boomer tomorrow and day after tomorrow and many tomorrows after that. Hollis would straighten things out with the dean and immediately start psychoanalyzing his embarrassing little brother-in-law. It would take time, lots of time.

He looked at his watch. It was five minutes to eleven. The sweep second hand whirling around the dial seemed to be reminding him of something. What was it?

"Roy," he heard someone call. "Roy, could I help you in some way? I suppose you came into my backyard with that woman. Exactly what did she want? Won't you come inside and tell me about it?"

Dolores Fox was standing on the back door step holding open the screen. She was dressed in an expensive looking lavender silk negligee patterned with splotches of navy blue and white flowers. Good heavens she had died her hair. It could not have turned into such an elegant shade of pearl gray since last December. The beautiful stuff was brushed into a perfect pompadour over her brow and swirled in waves half way over her ears to end in ringlets at the back of her neck.



"I'm sorry, Mrs. Fox," said Roy. "I'm sorry we came barging into your backyard. We should have waited at the front door. There's no excuse whatever for us to come rushing around to the back. We wouldn't have done it except we had something on our minds. We're sorry."

"We?" said Dolores. "I see only one of you. And I saw that strange woman take off and leave you behind. It seems everybody is leaving you behind. Won't you come in? You probably don't like coffee. It's all I've got. Coffee is getting scarce. They say they'll be rationing it by fall. Gasoline, tires, shoes, all sorts of things are going to be doled out with stamps from a ration book. This awful war--"

Roy hated to see her standing there holding open the screen. Apparently she really wanted to see him. A strange woman, Dolores Fox. Always dressed in pale silks, the very picture of the most lonesome woman in the world. Yet it was hard to come to her house without finding someone there. Larry Thorpe, for one, had been visiting her. And no telling what Dol Abbott said or did inside. Yet the woman was welcoming him in as though he were her one contact with the outside world. He gladly accepted her invitation and went into the kitchen.

Inside two dirty coffee cups sat on a little table sandwiched between the cabinet and the refrigerator. They were egg-shell porcelain cups edged in a lacey gold band that harmonized with a small pink rose design. One of the cups was chipped where the handle joined the top rim. A sugar and creamer to match sat on a doily in the center of the little table. In front of them was a dark blue plate with a lone raisin muffin

surrounded by some crumbs. In took no detective at all to see that two people and no more had been sharing coffee and gossip.

"I'll warm up the pot," she said. "There's a drop or two left in it. Enough for both of us to wet our tongues." As soon as she flipped the burner handle and the pilot light lit the flame she tip-toed to the kitchen door and peered out toward the front of the house. It was easy to see that this was her peek-hole. Probably a little mirror in the back hall was angled so she could see through the living room windows.

"Poor Vinnie," she said. "Still spading away at that pesky grass. Yesterday she completely ruined our spider lillies just when they were about to bloom. What should I do with her? Roy, do you have any suggestions? My sister is getting crankier every year. We need to get away from this place. If we stuck with our budget we could afford little trips to Mexico, maybe to California. We so desperately need a break, something that will make us feel restored. But it seems we're always faced with some expense that we hadn't counted on."

"I don't know," said Roy. "Vinnie seems happy spading the yard. All I suggest is she go ahead and do it."

"Oh, Roy, you're too practical," She laughed when she said it.

"A minute ago someone accused me of being cold-blooded. Before that someone else said I was a country hick. I must give a bad impression."

She twittered and assured him that was not the case. "People are jealous of you. That's why they get snippy. I wish all boys showed up as well as you do. Malcolm, for example. I suppose Larry told you the sad news. I saw you two talking

together, and I didn't want to interrupt. I knew he was telling you about Malcolm. When he gets home that'll be another expense. There's nothing to do but send him to that place in Kentucky and try to get him cured. You would think the Army would want boys badly enough to foot the bill of curing him themselves. If only we had someone to investigate things. Do you know of anyone who could jog the Army a little bit and see if they might not be giving Malcolm a raw deal?"

"No," Roy said. Of course he was thinking of Hollis. But he also knew Hollis would throw a fit at having to help a second problem child. At the same time the thing in the back of his mind had fought its way to consciousness. At eleven fifteen he was to meet Oswald McKey. He glanced at his watch.

"Is everything alright with you?" Dolores asked. "All this news in the papers. Good heavens, that fellow Malcolm roomed with is in a terrible fix. Let's hope nothing rubs off on to us. The thing to do is lay low for awhile. Everything is all right with you, isn't it?"

"There's nothing to worry about," said Roy. "Does Larry come here very often?"

She did not answer, but continued with her general questions as though she hadn't heard him. "I believe you've got a good part in one of the drama department's plays, haven't you? You're still in it, aren't you?"

This was so pointless. Coffee with a woman who was covering up her troubles with charm could lead to nothing but indigestion. He should be out of here and hurrying down to the Triple X. Common sense told him it would be idiotic to stand up the head of your department. After all just meeting him at the Triple X

would not mean he would have to go to bed with him tonight. Anyone could see McKay was feeling sorry for Roy, and right now he seemed to be hell bent on doing little things for him, little things that the rest of the world wouldn't get wind of. It might mean he was sort of silly about Roy, but not necessarily. No complications would arise until the distant future.

Besides McKay was so nice. If you had to stay here and be psychoanalyzed and be nice to everyone the professor would be a wonderfully comforting rock that he could crawl to for shelter. The old man wasn't bad, in fact he wasn't old. The truth was he might not be much older than Larry Thorpe.

"Larry and I were not talking about Malcolm," said Roy. He had to break up this conversation some way. The truth might break it off for good. But he pressed his lips together and decided not to go on with the truth. It would get him no where.

She didn't seem to notice the conversation had become saturated with new overtones. "What are your plans for the summer? Are you going on to school? I hear the University is encouraging students to attend summer school, to get their education out of the way as quickly as possible. The war time rush. If you get it out of the way quicker you're supposed to be able to do great things for your country quicker." Her face became clouded with a frown.

"I've got to go," said Roy. "I've got an appointment," and he excused himself as quickly as possible. She did not really seem to mind if he left so soon, and there was no question about the way he should leave. It would be through the front door. She still dropped slightly cynical phrases about the.

war effort as she politely led him through the central hall. The door where she did her practicing was closed, but a door which led to a bedroom was not. You could see into it, the freshly made bed and neat toilet articles arranged on the dresser, light pouring through a curtainless window, the fresh air rustling in through its slightly raised sash. No one was hiding in that room.

"You are still practicing?" he asked. "You still sing?"

"Why bless you, yes," she said. "If you would like to come back at one o'clock I'm going to work on some belle canto arias from Bellini."

"One?" asked Roy. "I'm afraid not. I've got an appointment at one." He did not add that it was with the dean. Nor did he add that he had another appointment in five minutes. Roy found that he did not want to leave even to fill an appointment with some one as nice as Oswald McKay. When he went out the front door he would be giving up on trying to find Beulah Astor. He would be giving up on getting a job. It was ridiculous of him to be wasting words with Dolores and never ask her outright if Beulah were here. He should have come right out with that question at first.

"I'm trying to locate Beulah Astor," he said. "You don't happen to know where I could get ahold of her?"

"Why, no, Roy. Beulah hasn't been here in months. No one comes to see us any more. It's strange. That woman you came with practically demanded that I produce Beulah out of thin air. I'm so sorry to disappoint both of you. You can see no one is here but Vinnie and I."

It was true. Their little house seemed deserted. No

dropped glove was in sight, no forgotten scarf. He couldn't even detect a whiff of cigarette smoke.

"Could I hear you sing some now?" he asked. "Just one aria?" After all, it would keep him inside the house. He would not be going out the door, an act which would mean he was giving up completely.

"But Roy," she said. "I have to put up the padding and everything. You know that. If not at one, then maybe next week."

"Maybe so," said Roy.

He was showing him out the front door. On the step he was tempted to stop and tell her everything, about the trouble he had had last night, about his appointment with the dean. But he realized it would be as much a waste of time as telling her that the conversation back there with Larry Thorpe meant a love affair was painfully ended.

The door closed behind him. As he walked toward the street he glanced at his watch. Eleven seven. Even if he ran he could not rendezvous on time. Right now McHay might be sitting alone in one of the plastic upholstered booths slightly afraid that Roy would stand him up. Now doubt he would wait. He might even wait until eleven thirty, or who knows he could hang on desperately until twelve. It all depended on how stuck he was with Roy. Poor man.

Roy had sauntered a block down the street before he began to piece together a new idea. No, it wasn't an idea. It was something too silly to be true, like the twist ending to a grade B movie.

But it might be worth investigating. And if he got caught

it would be no worse than getting discovered in her backyard. The clues, all admittedly very vague, were these: Winnie was standing in the yard when her sister had no intention of singing in her cubby hole. Why did she stay out toiling away at turf and sod on a warm day? Dolores, in her conversation with Roy had been careful not to mention the last time they had been together. That was last December seventh, a date very easy to remember. Amongst other things, Roy had been looking for a place to stay, possibly the little room over the garage. Dolores had, for once, lost her composure and told him the place was not for him. Today, the very polite Dolores had not seen fit to apologize about their little spat. Why? Could it be because the conversation might stray to the renters room over the garage? She had been careful to throw open all doors in the house, but what about the garage?

The back side of the garage was covered with trellis work and climbing roses. Some quite beautiful varieties were just beginning to bloom. A Herbert Hoover was showing the yellow and pink combination that was so striking. Beside it was the white Peace rose that seemed so pure against the sparkling green leaves. The last variety, the one over by the outside stairway was a dark American Beauty. Its long stems pushed the flowers out almost as though they wanted to shake hands with the passers-by.

The narrow outside stairway leading to the upper room needed repainting. You could still see it was white, but to be really fresh Dolores should somehow squeeze some money out of her budget to buy paint. Roy had taken no more than two steps up those stairs before he knew he had hit pay dirt.

The door at the top, also covered with slightly peeling white paint, opened, and there was Beulah Astor.

Beulah had a pig skin valise in her hand and was dressed as though ready to travel. Roy noticed the new life ahead of her had already brought great changes in her personal habits. All year, while teaching, she had looked terrible. No matter what dress she had on it either didn't hang right or it was the wrong color. Her makeup was notoriously splotched, and her hair was hit-and-run.

But today Beulah looked great. Everything she had on was simple but perfect. Her orange summer dress matched identically colored shoes, both of which made her dark brown hair radiate at its most lustrous. Fortunately, she had left off a hat entirely. A gold scarf around her neck contrasted just enough to make her look completely attired. She was carrying a pair of orange gloves in the hand that did not hold the valise.

Her eyes bugged out when she saw Roy. The presence of someone on the stairway threw her too much for her to have time to think of anything subtle. She blurted out, "What do you want?"

"Beulah. I mean Miss Astor. Do you mind if I call you Beulah? Once you told us in class we could use your first name. I think I'm ready for the professional stage. I could be an unde study or take a bit part. I'm not of the draft age. I'm willing to travel right now. It doesn't matter that school is not out. A job is more important to me than finishing out the semester."

Beulah set down her valise, took the pair of gloves and slapped at a lady bug that had landed on her left breast. "You



want a job? Well, what is that to me?"

Her bluff did not work. Roy was explaining that he had checked out a copy of Snows of Torment from the library, had studied it carefully, and would like to read for her. While he was explaining this the door behind Beulah opened a little further and another woman appeared.

This woman was surprisingly small, surprisingly so because Roy had seen pictures of Magda Cowles in the Theater Arts magazine and had supposed she was an average sized woman. Now he saw that her beautiful face and figure were the same, but both were on a diminutive scale. She made up for the size with vitality.

With one step on her beautiful leg she placed herself in front of the valise so the sunlight caught her blonde hair and illuminated her blue eyes. Roy also noticed that it illuminated the slightly heavy coloring on her eyelids. You would not say her makeup was overdone, but it did look a little theatrical. The second look and he saw that she was quite a bit older than she had shown up on the slick pages of the magazine.

Magda came to the point. "I saw you last night," she said. "You didn't see me. I watched your rehearsal from the next to the last row of the balcony. Remember what we were talking about this morning, Beulah? Well, let's talk it over some more. We've got forty minutes to catch the plane."

Beulah blew out her cheeks, but she let them relax without exploding. Controlling herself with a visible tightening of muscles she picked up her valise and went back inside the little room. Magda followed her in and closed the door.

Two minutes passed--it was now eleven fifteen--and the little actress reappeared. "Come on up," she said to Roy. "I

want to hear you read something entirely different."

Inside the room Roy saw where some of Dolores's budget had gone. No doubt the outside stairs were unpainted because she had blown the limit on the inside. New wall paper made the place seem like a movie setting for a quaint old house in New England. A hand woven rag rug looked expensive rather than what one usually associates with rags. The bedroom furniture was new maple. The window curtains were a filmy dotted Swiss that completed the picture of good taste.

Miss Cowles put on a pair of glasses, settled down in a freshly slip-covered chair and handed Roy a fairly thick typewritten script. Roy noticed it was titled, Nottingham Nights and was by someone named Laura Leash.

It turned out to be another British war play, and the part he was reading was that of another RAF pilot. Just like A Rose Grows on the White Cliffs of Dover this one opened with a bombing raid.

He was surprised and amused at the conversation that went on after he had read a bit. Miss Cowles was saying, "This play gets me. That Rose thing doesn't. Maybe it's because Laura Leash is really British. She doesn't have to strain to get that part of it over. I was thinking last night, all the time I was hid up in the balcony, Abbot is working too hard at it. You get nothing but British, British thrown at you in every line. I like a play with some content in it. Some guts to it."

Beulah didn't like this turn of events. She was shrewd enough not to contradict the famous Miss Cowles, but she did remind her time was getting short. "The plane won't wait for

us."

Suddenly Magda got up and said. "I've made up my mind. We're going to do Nottingham next fall, not Rose. That's that."

Beulah twisted one foot. "We'd better get out to the airport. We can talk over about next fall on the plane."

"There's no talking to it. We're going to do Nottingham."

"Let's just get to the airport," said Beulah. "Let's just get on the plane. We might bump into Merle out at the airport."

"Merle is out," said Magda Cowles. "She didn't show up well last night. We don't need another actress. We need someone to take Twinky's place until Snows closes in August. We might need someone to take Danforth's place in the Nottingham cast if he gets drafted in October."

"We can think about all this on the plane. We don't have to choose and cast next fall's play right here in this room--"

Roy was seeing several things. Dol Abbol's rush to find Beulah was not motivated by jealousy. She, too, was looking for a chance to get ahead in the theater. She gave up too soon.

Magda looked at Roy. "How are you fixed with Uncle Sam? The draft isn't breathing down your neck, is it?" When Roy assured her he was only seventeen she said, "How about your plane fare to Denver? Have you got enough cash to get on the plane with us in thirty minutes? I can put you up in a hotel room in Denver, I can put you on as an understudy until Snows of Torment closes in August. If you're not in the service I might be able to work you in some place in our Broadway show this fall, whatever we decide to do. But no plane money. No advances.

The only way Roy could jump this last hurdle was to tell Magda that he had written home to his father for fifty dollars, that the letter might be at his boarding house when the noon mail came. If they could stop by his address they would find his suitcase already packed. The check from his Dad might be there too.

"Might be? That doesn't sound too good. When did you write for this little handout?"

Roy swallowed and said, "A few days ago." If he told her he put the letter in the mail only yesterday he might be finished right then and there.

By telling her this little white lie he managed to get in a taxi with Beulah and Magda. They talked some more on the way down from Fifty-first Street to the boarding house near Vaca. She kept asking him what he had thought about the future. Did he really want to be an actor? Beulah sat quietly in the front seat. Once she smiled at the taxi driver and asked him for a light.

Roy must have given Miss Cowles the right answers because the lack of a letter at the boarding house did not get him fired. The actress sputtered a bit but finally said, "Oh, all right. I'll pay your ticket just this once, but it all comes off your first check. And that big pasteboard box has to stay here. I'm not paying for excess baggage."

As he got on the plane at the airport he realized he was leaving a lot of loose ends behind. The fact that Mr. Sollers might have put term papers in his suitcase instead of shirts was the least of them. The worst part would be explaining to



to his mother and Blanche why he could not go to Cliff's funeral. Then there might be the fact that his dad would not even send fifty dollars. He might be thinking his son, who might have grown up so much thqt he would have a hard time recognizing him, would be in Grass Prairie next Friday and there would be no need to send a check. (Someone in Grass Prairie might also wonder why he wasn't distinguishing himself in the Army rather than touching his dad for fifty dollars--be careful of that possibility). But most of that, as well as his sister's anger, would be ironed out if he really and truly got on the professional stage.

At twelve o'clock the plane took off. As the engines bumped the fusilage down the runway he wondered about poor old McKay. Was he still waiting at the Triple X? Too bad if he was, but riding in a four motored airplane was very exhilerating.

THE END